

# Whose Gertrude Stein?

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Contemporary Poetry, Modernist  
Institutions and Stein's Troublesome Legacy

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

## Statement of Originality

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Details of collaboration and publications:

- Material from Chapter 2 published as 'Modernist Group Identities and Gertrude Stein's "portraits" of Matisse and Picasso' in *Ecloga: Journal of Literature and the Arts* New Work in Modernist Studies Special Edition (2014), 109-129.
- Data visualisations in Chapter 5 produced in collaboration with Amy Macdougall, PhD student, Medical Statistics: National Heart and Lung Institute, Imperial College University of London.

## Abstract

This thesis is an examination of the ways in which, in what Bourdieu theorises as the ‘*space of literary or artistic position-takings*’, Gertrude Stein has been continually positioned and repositioned, constructed and reconstructed: by writers in her own period, in modernism scholarship, and, particularly, by writers staking their claim as the literary avant-garde of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries.<sup>1</sup> Since her recuperation by the Language Poets in the 1970s, and in the literary histories proposed by Marjorie Perloff and others, Stein has been positioned as the originator of an alternative avant-garde genealogy which has resisted the ‘institutionalised’ modernism of the New Critics. This legacy continues to the present day in claims by writers like Kenneth Goldsmith that she is a precursor for Conceptual Writing. Because they are predicated on Stein’s resistance to the institution of modernism, and hinge on her removal from its history, none of these arguments discuss in any detail Stein’s relationship to the historical movement which is the immediate context for her work – to the institution of modernism itself or to the institutions with which it engages. My thesis challenges the removal of Stein from her milieu by showing how her textual production must be read alongside her activity on her contemporary scene and her representation of and by other modernists. In the thesis, I re-read Stein’s work as a series of explicit interventions in the institutions which form the context of the cultural production of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In doing so, I consider the motivations for the reconstructions and repositionings of Stein, tracing the historiography of her presentation as an exceptional figure dislocated from her context.

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu ‘The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed’, in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), pp.29-73 (p.30).

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# Introduction

## An avant-garde genealogy

Since her recuperation by the Language poets in the late 1970s, and in the literary histories proposed by Charles Bernstein, Peter Quartermain, Marjorie Perloff and others, Gertrude Stein has been situated as the early-twentieth-century originator of an avant-garde genealogy.<sup>2</sup> This genealogy is identified as the alternative to the ‘institutionalised’ modernism which culminated in the canon endorsed by the New Critics. The argument for her status as an avant-garde anomaly continues to the present day in claims by Kenneth Goldsmith, Craig Dworkin and associated writers and scholars that Stein is a precursor for conceptual writing, a contemporary ‘tendency’ in poetry which is explicitly characterised as the twenty-first century inheritor of the avant-garde.<sup>3</sup> The claim for Stein’s place in the genealogies these scholars and poets write is predicated on a distinction between her work and the cultural production associated with the ‘institution’ of modernism, and it hinges on the view that her writing stands apart from canonical modernism and its legacy. Because of their basis in Stein’s distinctiveness, none of these arguments discuss in any detail the relationship of her literary practice to its immediate cultural context, often explicitly detaching the work from the historical moment in which it was produced and reading it as a sealed and self-reflexive entity. In reading Stein’s oeuvre as divorced from the history of literary modernism, these arguments find an escape

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<sup>2</sup> See Charles Bernstein, *Contents Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1986); Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Marjorie Perloff, *Twenty-First Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002). All of these texts are discussed in detail in Chapter 1. See also Juliana Spahr and Joan Retallack, discussed later in the introduction. For other references, see Chapter 1. Stein is also often cited in introductions to collections of ‘innovative’ poetry through the 1980s and 90s. See, for example, *In The American Tree: Language, Poetry, Realism*, ed. by Ron Siliman (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1986), *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America and the UK*, ed. by Maggie O’Sullivan (London: Reality Street Editions, 1996) and *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women*, ed. by Mary Sloan (Jersey City: Talisman Publishers, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Craig Dworkin, ‘The Fate of Echo’, in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, ed. by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), p.xliv. For Stein as a precursor to conceptual writing beyond her discussion in Dworkin and Goldsmith’s anthology and in their other works and texts, see also Marjorie Perloff, Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman, as discussed in Chapter 5. This genealogy is also traced in Paul Stephens’s 2015 study, which puts Stein and conceptual writing at either end of a lineage defined as avant-garde. In Stephens’s argument, the avant-garde is defined as a particular kind of response to developments in technology. See Paul Stephens, *The Poetics of Information Overload: From Gertrude Stein to Conceptual Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

route out of the sanctioned form of modernism which was bound to the cultural hegemony of its own time and assimilated as doctrine into the New Critical academy. An alternative literary history can spring from Stein's corpus, both because it was always a disturbing presence in modernism, even in its early-twentieth-century phase, and because it has not been absorbed into the literary history written by the New Critics in the post-war period.

The contention of this thesis is that Stein's work is not a peculiar practice distinct from the bulk of modernist cultural production: that, on the contrary, her texts make their meaning in specific engagements with the context from which the arguments for her avant-garde difference presume they stand aloof. In my reading, her texts are a series of conscious and explicit interventions on the cultural field, and this is an argument which inevitably troubles the histories which set her work purely in resistance to the cultural landscape of her period. In returning the texts to their milieu, I engage directly with those histories, thinking through Stein's work in its relation to 'modernism' and probing the subsequent writing of its history as 'avant-garde' *as opposed to* 'modernist'. I will be examining her particular and shifting relations to her cultural context, mapping both the positions she takes and the positions she is assigned by her contemporaries in the network Pierre Bourdieu theorises as the '*space of literary or artistic position-takings*'.<sup>4</sup>

One of the major motivations for an exceptional avant-garde Stein is the desire to fully distinguish 'experimental' contemporary poetry from the 'mainstream' writing viewed as, at various moments, 'academic', 'normative', 'tepid', or 'what passes as... poetry'.<sup>5</sup> Put very broadly, in these arguments, 'Establishment poetry' is the legacy of institutionalised modernism, and experimental poetry is the descendant of the avant-garde.<sup>6</sup> This story of a schism in poetry has its roots in Peter Bürger's classic 1974 text *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, and for many years, up until the late 1990s, that story was highly significant in the discourse of modernism studies.<sup>7</sup> Since the turn of this century, however, modernism scholarship has moved away from this kind of account and toward an understanding of the period as much more multilinear and composite,

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, p.30.

<sup>5</sup> Dworkin, p.xlv; Bernstein, p.155; Quartermain, p.19; Perloff, p.4; Dworkin, p.xlv.

<sup>6</sup> Perloff, p.4.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974). Published in English as *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

more a series of intersecting configurations than a story about the success of mainstream institutionalised modernism at the expense of the failure of the radical anti-bourgeois avant-garde. The shift in modernism studies away from this narrative, however, has not been replicated in the discussion of Stein's legacy for contemporary poetry. In the significant current of scholarship linked to contemporary experimental poetry, Stein has long been and is still inserted into literary history in ways which follow the logic of Bürger's account.

### **Field, concepts, institutions**

The introduction to the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism Volume VII: Modernism and the New Criticism* (2000) provides, in brief, a picture of the millennial contest over the historiography of modernism with which this thesis engages in its critical assessment of the historiography of 'Gertrude Stein'. Menand and Rainey's introduction exemplifies the debate over the relations of three key historical concepts which scholarship of the period had employed since the 1980s: avant-garde, modernism and postmodernism.<sup>8</sup> Focusing on the institutionalisation of modernism as the central issue around which these concepts and their narratives turn, the introduction delineates what it sees as the two opposing positions in modernism studies at that point. The first position follows the story of modernism first posited in the work of Peter Bürger and Andreas Huyssen:

In conformity with the opposition paradigm that informs the work of Bürger and Huyssen is a narrative that increasingly structures current accounts of modernism... it is urged that the twentieth century has witnessed two distinct revolutions in the field of culture, the first a 'real' revolution, in which artistic activity was urgently politicised and innovation swept through all the arts, the second an equally important if less noted revolution in which universities and other institutions appropriated modernism's formal repertory, canonised its works and artists, and sapped its political energies.<sup>9</sup>

This version of modernism's history and legacy, proposed by Bürger and Huyssen but also by other scholars such as Raymond Williams, is seen by Menand and Rainey at this point, in 2000, as the dominant narrative. The second position is the emerging approach which Menand and Rainey both represent and support. They reject the Bürger/Huyssen understanding of modernism because it 'rests upon a conception of

<sup>8</sup> See also Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le Savoir* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979). Published in English as *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Louis Menand and Lawrence Rainey, 'Introduction', *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 7 Modernism and the New Criticism*, ed. by A. Walton Litz, Louis Menand and Lawrence Rainey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp.1-14 (pp.5-6). Further references to the Introduction are given after quotations in the text.



the arts that has been distilled of material complexity and bears no relation to the realities of cultural production within complex, modern societies'. In its place, they postulate a history which would be written in the act of seeking and engaging with those complexities. Arguing that 'there is little ground for sustaining a programmatic distinction between the avant-garde and modernism', they also offer a vision of the relation between modernism and the avant-garde not as a divide but as a similarly ambiguous complex of intersections and configurations (6). In countering the conception of modernism which they see as exemplified by Bürger and Huyssen, Menand and Rainey simultaneously reflect and effect a shift in modernist studies by alluding to the new frameworks through which the history of the period is beginning to be written.

The debate over the historiography of modernism I am outlining has at its heart the identification of a range of forms, practices and structures under the sign of the 'institution'. The different categorisations of the institution by these two schools of thought have formed the theoretical bases for their distinctive conceptualisations of the complex of positions on the field of cultural production. The initial sparse field which the discourses of Bürger, Huyssen and Williams invoke is structured as an oppositional space, and it is this vision of the field which in turn structures the arguments for Stein's avant-garde position and its legacy. On the one side, there is the bourgeois hegemony which engenders and controls the socially sanctioned institutions of the market and the academy, and which needs to institutionalise art as a category separate from life in order to neutralise its power as social critique. On the other, there is the radical anti-bourgeois avant-garde which wants to return art to life and destroy or evade those hegemonic institutions which mediate and regulate social relations including the relation of art to life. Three institutions emerge from this delineation: the market, the academy, and the institution 'art', which is at different points in the arguments identified with the institution of modernism. In relation to this model, Stein's work is ascribed the avant-garde position on the field, a position which resists all these institutions: the institutionalisation of art as modernism, the academy which sanctions it, and the commodifying logic of the market.

In the arguments of Bürger, Williams and Huyssen which underlie the avant-garde genealogy, the institutionalisation of modernism is configured in slightly different ways. For Bürger, the institution of art equates with late-nineteenth-century Aesthetic

movements, characterised by the concept of ‘art for art’s sake’. In declaring the position of ‘art for art’s sake’, Aestheticism not only emphasises the institutionalisation of art as a separate sphere, it makes ‘the distance from the praxis of life the content of the works’. In Bürger’s description the avant-garde is formed in resistance to this move, as an ‘attempt to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art’.<sup>10</sup> The two strands, Aestheticism and its continuation, and the avant-garde which resists it, therefore exist side-by-side in an antagonistic relation. Although he defines the institution of *art*, Bürger avoids the term ‘modernism’ in order to distinguish the avant-garde as a historically specific rupture. When *Theory of the Avant-Garde* was written, ‘modernism’ was beginning to be used to identify the whole period including Aestheticism, its development into the twentieth century, and the movements designated as avant-garde. For Bürger, the avant-garde is a reaction to Aestheticism rather than an aspect of its development, and so the term ‘modernism’, which encompasses both Aestheticism and its development *and* the avant-garde, is for him misleading. The use of the concept of modernism to designate the ‘institutionalised’ practices of the period as opposed to the avant-garde is developed later, and Bürger’s initial avoidance of the term clearly has a theoretical function in relation to the historiographies he challenges. Bürger’s distinction between the institution of art and the avant-garde is therefore the basis of the distinction between the avant-garde and modernism in the accounts of Stein as avant-garde origin.

In Williams’s later account, modernism is initially identical to the avant-garde, and for him the institutionalisation of modernism comes after its avant-garde phase, created in the suppression or mutation of this avant-garde by or into the bourgeois establishment through the procedure of academic canonisation. Williams outlines the historiographical consequences of this move in his 1987 lecture ‘When Was Modernism?’

After modernism is canonised, however, by the post-war settlement and its accompanying, complicit academic endorsements... ‘Modernism’ is confined to this highly selective field and denied to everything else in an act of pure ideology, whose first, unconscious irony is that, absurdly, it stops history dead. Modernism being the terminus, everything afterwards is counted out of the development. It is after; stuck in the post.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bürger, p.49.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Williams, ‘When Was Modernism?’ in *The Politics of Modernism*, ed. by Tony Pinkney (London: Verso 1989), pp. 31-35, (pp.34-35).

In this analysis, the New Critical canonisation of modernism neutralises its avant-garde critique, subsumes it into the bourgeois worldview and in doing so precludes any further challenge. Indeed, in appropriating the category of the modern it denies the possibility of any new position outside that worldview. In many of the avant-garde histories written by and for experimental poetry, Stein's work, excluded from the canon, also avoids this later phase of institutionalisation, enables an escape from the termination of history Williams delineates, and therefore offers a possible continuity for the avant-garde.

In *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Andreas Huyssen integrates both these positions by defining modernism over and against the avant-garde from the outset and equating it directly with the institution of art Bürger conceptualises. In his argument, modernism is always the sanctioned form and the avant-garde from the start exists in opposition to it, and so 'the traditional way in which art and literature were produced, disseminated, and received, is never challenged by modernism, but remained intact whereas 'the avant-garde...attempted to subvert art's autonomy, its artificial separation from life, and its institutionalization as "high art"'.<sup>12</sup> On the field hypothesized by this history, modernism is the institutionalised art which exists in the separate sphere required by bourgeois hegemony, and the avant-garde stands in opposition to this as it stands in opposition to all bourgeois institutions. This model means that modernism, because it exists in a rarefied sphere, and the avant-garde, because it rejects all bourgeois institutions, *both* stand in antagonistic positions in relation to the market and all it entails as an apparatus: commodification, consumerism, and mass culture. It is this integrated model which fully enables the argument for a genealogy which begins with Stein. Her work is originally avant-garde, and so never occupied the autonomous sphere Bürger delineates, and it also continues to resist the process of academic institutionalisation Williams postulates. Thus, Stein is never subsumed into the bourgeois paradigm and she continues to inhabit the avant-garde position Huyssen articulates, which holds at bay the academy, the market, and the institution of modernism.

The new historiography indicated by Menand and Rainey produces a denser, thickly occupied field in which a range of more provisional, temporary and both practically

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<sup>12</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986). Quoted in Menand and Rainey, p.4.

and conceptually unstable institutions operate alongside, intersect or disclose themselves out of the apparently monolithic institutions. These, Menand and Rainey identify as the ‘particular set of institutions which were essential to modernist production – the little reviews, the deluxe editions, a corpus of patron-collectors and investors, and specific groups of smaller publishers’ (4). This model enables Menand and Rainey to argue that modernism, the avant-garde, the market, the academy and all the ‘particular’ institutions of modernism are intersecting forces on the field, that ‘[t]he avant-garde was not located outside of or against the institution of modernism, but was firmly situated within it – just as the institution of modernism was not poised wholly outside or against the changing economy of the new consumerist and professionalist society which surrounded it, but was engaged in a more complex and ambiguous dialogue with it’ (6). In this charting of the socio-cultural scene, the institution of modernism is retained, but the concept of the institution of art is dissolved. As a result, the distance between art (whether considered modernist or avant-garde) and social and economic life is collapsed. This reconfigures both modernism and the avant-garde as engaged with the activity of the whole field: with the market, with the academy, with the other particular means of production and reception, and with each other. The positing of these more porous categories complicates the story of an avant-garde in opposition to establishment modernism and destabilises the argument that has twentieth-century literary history as the history of the suppression or subsuming of the avant-garde by the institution of modernism. This evidently has implications for the narrative of Stein’s originary and persistent avant-garde line. If the avant-garde does not stand in opposition to modernism, and if the avant-garde engages with the market and the academy, then it is hard to see how Stein can be distinguished as the genesis of a resistant line which remains separate from all these institutions across time.

Menand and Rainey identify another important strand of the narrative they counter: that, for Bürger and Huyssen, ‘[t]he avant-garde and postmodernism share a genuine historical and ideological continuity’ (4). This also complicates the story which has Stein as an originator of that continuity. Her work has been claimed straightforwardly as the first manifestation of what became the postmodern mode, and, importantly, the

poets who take her up in the late 1970s are identified as ‘postmodern’.<sup>13</sup> Postmodern poetry, looking back, conceived in hindsight its own roots in Stein’s work, became the legitimate inheritor of the avant-garde, and so escaped the institution of modernism altogether. Menand and Rainey’s approach challenges this narrative of the re-emergence of a new anti-modernist avant-garde in the shape of postmodernism because it is predicated on that opposition of modernism and the avant-garde which they bring into question. The Stein genealogy up to and including its present reworking as conceptual writing in fact *depends* on the institutionalisation of modernism because it works from the premise that modernism is marked off by its institutionalisation and so can be productively separated from both the historical avant-garde and from postmodernism and its successors. Postmodernism therefore becomes not just the revival of the avant-garde but the other end of a separate, discrete and unbroken strand of history. The story of Stein’s postmodernism reflects the desire of a succession of poets and scholars to find that continuity with what is perceived of as the avant-garde in order to codify a practice which sustains or resumes its original challenge.

The new historicism defined in Menand and Rainey’s introduction is exemplified by Rainey’s own highly influential 1998 book *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture*. Rainey’s new characterisation has modernism’s milieu as ‘an institutional field of cultural production being rapidly and radically transformed into one more variegated and complex than the rigid dichotomy between “high” and “low” allows’. For Rainey, ‘Modernism’s ambiguous achievement ...was to probe the interstices dividing that variegated field and to forge within it a strange and unprecedented space for cultural production’.<sup>14</sup> Rainey’s 1998 study and the 2000 *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* signal that move to a form of modernist studies which is more rigorously and minutely historicized and which continues to challenge, complicate and dissolve the perceived stability of institutional borders, particularly those which might sustain the dichotomy between ‘high’ and ‘low’

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<sup>13</sup> For examples of work on Stein’s ‘postmodernism’ see Neil Schmitz, ‘Gertrude Stein as Post-Modernist: The Rhetoric of “Tender Buttons”’, *Journal of Modern Literature* 3: 5 (1974), 203–18; Renée Riese Hubert, ‘Gertrude Stein, Cubism, and the Postmodern Book’, *Genre* 20 (1987), 329–358; Ellen E. Berry, *Curved Thought and Textual Wandering: Gertrude Stein’s Postmodernism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); Nicola Pitchford, ‘Unlikely Modernism, Unlikely Postmodernism: Stein’s Tender Buttons’, *American Literary History* 11: 4 (1999), 642–667.

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p.3.

culture which Rainey indicates. Thus, the ‘institution’ of modernism previously seen as the ‘high’ culture elite ratified by the academy and separate from the market, becomes the ‘institutions’ of modernism, and the cultural production of the period is not seen as occupying an autonomous sphere but rather realised in its dynamic and fluctuating relationships with all the institutions which form, regulate and sustain cultural and social life.

## Two Steins

The blurring or collapsing of the dividing line between what had been previously conceived in scholarly historiography as the autonomous sphere of ‘high’ art sanctioned by the academy and the range of ‘low’ culture forms tied to the commodity culture of the market has been taken up by many scholars since, and has become an established and productive area of research, perhaps exemplified in Aaron Jaffe’s statement in *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* that ‘modernist culture is ordinary’.<sup>15</sup> In the arguments for Gertrude Stein’s avant-garde status, however, this distinction has not been relinquished or fully problematized, and the opposition between high and low culture still troubles the narrative which has Stein as avant-garde anomaly. This in turn brings into relief the inherent problem of the distinction between high and low culture for the identification of the avant-garde as such. For many of the arguments which put Stein in this position, most notably Peter Quartermain’s *Disjunctive Poetics*, but also Juliana Spahr’s book *Everybody’s Autonomy* (2001), Stein’s work returns art to life because it engages with the vernacular and with mass culture as well as with the personal intimacies of everyday life.<sup>16</sup> Rather than existing in the separate sphere of high culture, Stein’s work is very often read as, unlike the ‘elitist’ work of other modernists, offering a more authentic, more personal and less selective engagement with the modern world, including with the sphere of mass culture. Thus, Stein is on the other side of the divide, with TS Eliot

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<sup>15</sup> Aaron Jaffe *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.7. See also Loren Glass, *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880-1980* (New York: NYU Press, 2004) and Jonathan Goldman, *Modernism is the Literature of Celebrity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> In *Disjunctive Poetics*, Quartermain claims that ‘Stein wants her writing to be available to *any* speaker or reader of English, no matter how “alien” she or he may be, no matter how ignorant of cultural matters or conventions’ (Quartermain, p.42). For Spahr, Stein ‘turns populist speech patterns into art’ and she argues that ‘this art which appears strange and unusual to some can have roots in the common, the everyday, can include everybody’. See Juliana Spahr, *Everybody’s Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), p.49.

in particular often posited as her elitist antagonist. Indeed, across the range of Stein scholarship, from Ulla Dydo's *Gertrude Stein: The Language that Rises* through Spahr's book to Barbara Will's *Gertrude Stein, Modernism and the Problem of 'Genius'* the contention is often maintained that her work is more inherently 'democratic' than that of other modernist writers, and in this sense she is again distinguished from modernism in terms of the high/low divide which pits the elitist 'academic' or 'classical' modernism against its mass culture nemesis.<sup>17</sup> This aspect of Stein's historiography, however, complicates the conceptualisation of her work as avant-garde because, in seeing her as engaging with mass culture forms and with the democratic discourse which underpins the capitalist economy, it brings her into the sphere of commodity culture which the avant-garde exists to critique.

The problem of Stein's position vis-à-vis commodity culture has created a divide in Stein studies, one which becomes particularly acute in the arguments which characterise her as avant-garde.<sup>18</sup> This divide is between studies which read Stein's *activity* as collector, salonniere and modernist persona immersed in the logic of the market and those which read Stein's *writing* as a radical practice explicitly resistant to capitalism and to all the bourgeois institutions which shore it up. The arguments for the 'avant-garde' Stein, in order to read her writing as avant-garde, tend almost without exception to discuss it as a separate entity outside or resistant to her cultural context, or to see that context as largely irrelevant to its meaning.<sup>19</sup> The problematic nature of this account of Stein's work and motivations is illustrated by Ulla Dydo's introduction to *A Stein Reader* (1993), a collection that consolidates the view of Stein's work, first articulated in the work of the Language poets, as resistant to commodity culture.<sup>20</sup> The late-twentieth-century reassessment initiated by the Language poets in the 1970s and which gained momentum through the 1980s and 90s places its emphasis on the identification of 'Gertrude Stein' as an experimental writer, and explicitly opposes this to an identification of her as a persona or celebrity. This opposition exists because the celebrity Stein is bound up with the modernism they

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<sup>17</sup> Ulla Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: the Language that Rises 1923-1934* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003); Barbara Will, *Gertrude Stein, Modernism and the Problem of 'Genius'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> For an exploration of the tensions in Stein's position created by her relations to both commodity culture and the avant-garde, see Timothy W Galow, *Writing Celebrity: Stein, Fitzgerald, and the Modern(ist) Art of Self-Fashioning* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> I will discuss this in full in Chapter 1

<sup>20</sup> Gertrude Stein, *A Stein Reader*, ed. by Ulla Dydo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993).

want to distinguish her from and the commodity culture which, for them, her experimental work resists.

This divided Stein is reflected in the introduction to *A Stein Reader* and forms the explicit curatorial stance which defines the content of the collection. Dydo declares that the collection aims to ‘chang[e] the balance of Stein work in print’, in order to promote ‘the subversive experimental work of Gertrude Stein’ and offer ‘an introduction to her language experiments’.<sup>21</sup> Arguing that it ‘differs from other widely used collections in print’, Dydo goes on to construct two versions of Stein in her critique of extant collections, ‘chief of [which] is *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, edited by Carl Van Vechten’. Dydo argues that this 1946 collection ‘was planned from the start to include... late “public” works in conventional English’ and includes only ‘a limited number of experimental pieces’. Pointing out that Van Vechten’s collection ‘begins with the popular *Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*’, she suggests that it ‘followed the personality publicized and familiar from the American lecture tour’ (4). This view divides Stein into the public, popular icon constructed through the *Autobiography* and the lectures in ‘conventional English’, and the ‘subversive experimental’ writer whose work is neither popular nor public. This is emphasised when Dydo outlines the ‘larger aims’ of *A Stein Reader*: ‘it presents Stein the modernist innovator, not the personality. It concentrates on experimental work written “from inside” and excludes her later public works written “from outside” in conventional English’ (5).

This presents a picture of two distinctive ‘Steins’ and sets up a series of binary oppositions: the ‘inside’ Stein associated with the private, the experimental and the unconventional, and the ‘outside’ Stein associated with the public, the popular and the conventional. The representation of the ‘publicized’ face of Stein as ‘familiar’ and ‘popular’ presents Stein the personality as a figure who is known, understood and assimilated. This implies that the public Stein is therefore in many ways an institutionalised figure, constructed in and for the legitimising organs which govern the production and reception of the author and her work. Stein the experimenter is, in contrast, ‘subversive’, ‘unconventional’ and so definitely anti-institutional. This in turn implies a distinction in value between the real or authentic Stein of the private

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<sup>21</sup> Ulla Dydo *A Stein Reader*, p.3. Further references are given after quotations in the text.



experiment and the less authentic Stein of the public persona. Thus, the emphasis on the private versus the public and the related division of Stein into the experimental writer and the modernist persona enables Stein to be the avant-garde writer experimental poetry needs by sealing the work off both aesthetically and temporally from her activity on the cultural field. The function of this divide for the writers who claim Stein as an origin is here brought into sharp relief: in order for Stein's work to be authentically avant-garde, it *must* be read as separate from the institutions at play on the field of cultural production. When this view of Stein is unsustainable in relation to the market popularity of *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*, the work and the 'Gertrude Stein' who wrote it are not valid precursors.

For many years, Stein's art collection and her salon had overshadowed her writing, and so the view expressed by Ulla Dydo is also prompted by a desire to 'chang[e] the balance': to challenge and rectify the historical tendency to engage with Stein only on these terms. This tendency first appeared in Stein's own lifetime, as articulated in Edmund Wilson's 1931 declaration:

Gertrude Stein is a singular case in this respect. Widely ridiculed and seldom enjoyed, she has yet played an important role in connection with other writers who have become popular...Most of us balk at her soporific rigmaroles, her echolaliac incantations, her half-witted sounding catalogues of numbers; most of us read her less and less. Yet, remembering especially her early work, we are still always aware of her presence in the background of contemporary literature.<sup>22</sup>

This view was still dominant in the 1970s, when the Language poets picked up Stein's early work, with a particular emphasis on *Tender Buttons*, and began to study the writing itself in earnest. The approach which the Language poets initially countered is exemplified by James R. Mellow's *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein & Company* (1974), which tends to valorise her social activity and her 'services in exposing modern art to a continuous stream of international visitors' above her literary practice.<sup>23</sup> This still remains a tendency in Stein studies, and many other studies since have taken a biographical approach, for example Linda Wagner-Martin's *Favored Strangers* (1995) and Brenda Wineapple's *Sister Brother* (1996).<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the reading of Stein as a personality is still a prevalent current in recent research, for example in

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<sup>22</sup> Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (New York: C Scribner's Sons, 1931), p.202.

<sup>23</sup> James R Mellow, *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein & Company* (London: Phaidon Press, 1974), p.4.

<sup>24</sup> Linda Wagner-Martin, *Favored Strangers: Gertrude Stein and Her Family* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995); Brenda Wineapple, *Sister Brother: Gertrude and Leo Stein* (New York: Putnam, 1996).

Karen Leick's study *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity* (2009), which, although it provides much detailed and interesting work on the contexts of production and reception for Stein's work, barely discusses the writing itself.<sup>25</sup>

A particularly problematic practice in this kind of reading of Stein is to use the 'autobiographical' works as documentary evidence. This is common in the stories of Stein the personality written through the late twentieth century, but it also occurs in Leick's more recent and explicitly historicist study. In her discussion of the criticisms and mockeries of *Tender Buttons* in American newspapers after its publication in 1914, she argues that 'Stein did not seem to mind the book's reception' and uses, as evidence for this, the fact that:

Alice reports in *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*: '[Tender Buttons] was a very charming little book and Gertrude Stein was enormously pleased, and it, as everyone knows, had an enormous influence on all young writers and started off columnists in the newspapers of the whole country on their long campaign of ridicule. I must say that when the columnists are really funny, and they quite often are, Gertrude Stein chuckles and reads them aloud to me'.<sup>26</sup>

Not only does this comment suggest that Alice B Toklas's narrative voice is authentic rather than Stein's genre-bending construct, it also fails to take account of the specific function of the text in writing a history of the period which, amongst other things, valorises Stein and gives her a significant position in it. It is important to see all Stein's texts as products of a particular cultural moment and to understand their function in her self-presentation and in the corresponding presentation of her position in relation to the other gestures, practices and position-takings with which they intersect. This example reveals the potential danger of seeing the text as a historical document rather than reading it as an example of an aesthetic practice which is itself an interpolation in the writing of that history.

The divide between Stein the persona and Stein the experimental writer also exists in scholarship beyond the arguments which claim Stein as avant-garde. Among scholars who pay close attention to Stein's work, there is a tendency to read it as a discrete entity and as, however experimental, an esoteric engagement primarily with the personal and the quotidian. Marianne DeKoven's *A Different Language*, Harriet Scott Chessman's *The Public is Invited to Dance*, Lisa Ruddick's *Body, Text, Gnosis* and Ulla Dydo's *The Language that Rises* all do important work in reading Stein's work

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<sup>25</sup> Karen Leick, *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> Leick, p.41.

in its emphasis on the significance of the domestic world and the world of sexuality and intimate relationships.<sup>27</sup> Seeing Stein's private experimental language as an alternative to the patriarchal discourse of public culture, these readings have put the argument for Stein's importance for feminism, and, indeed the related interest in the 'everyday' of modernism has been and remains a productive strand of research.<sup>28</sup>

Yet I would maintain that reading the work as a personal project isolates it from the cultural scene with which it intersects and therefore sees only half the story. The recent move to a rigorous historicising of modernist cultural production speaks convincingly of the necessity of seeing the whole picture. Since the mid-2000s, some scholars have developed culturally contextualised readings in studies which deal with Stein. These include Alex Goody's *Modernist Articulations*, and Timothy W Galow's *Writing Celebrity*, both of which begin to situate Stein in her cultural scene and read her work as a response to it.<sup>29</sup> The reading of Stein's work as a discrete experimental practice, however, still represents the prevailing approach in the arguments about the legacy of her work for contemporary poetry. Even the poet Joan Retallack, in the introduction to her *Selections* (2008), which so carefully looks at Stein's work from a variety of contextual angles, does not situate her writing in the context of literary modernism and does not examine its engagements with the cultural and institutional

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<sup>27</sup> Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983); Harriet Scott Chessman, *The Public is Invited to Dance: Representation, the Body, and Dialogue in Gertrude Stein* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989); Lisa Cole Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Gnosis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). These are all important feminist engagements with Stein which, along with the work of other scholars such as Jayne L Walker, Shari Benstock, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Catharine R Stimpson and Bonnie Kime Scott, were significantly involved in her initial recuperation and the development of Stein studies. See Jayne L Walker, *The Making of a Modernist: Gertrude Stein from 'Three Lives' to 'Tender Buttons'* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984) Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and Bonnie Kime Scott, *The Gender of Modernism: a Critical Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). Catharine Stimpson has published numerous articles on Stein, for example 'The Mind, the Body, and Gertrude Stein', *Critical Inquiry* 3: 3 (1977), 489-50; 'Gertrude Stein: Humanism and Its Freaks', *Boundary 2*: 12/13 (1984), 301-19 and 'The Somagrams of Gertrude Stein', *Poetics Today* 6: 1/2 (1985), 67-80. Chessman and Stimpson's shared interest in Stein culminated in their joint editorship of *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1903-1932* and *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1932-1946* (New York: Library of America, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> For example, the 15<sup>th</sup> MSA conference, 'Everydayness and the Event', considered the significance of the everyday as a major theme.

<sup>29</sup> Alex Goody, *Modernist Articulations: a Cultural Study of Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

field.<sup>30</sup> Instead, the work's relationship to the personal context is once again emphasised when she suggests that 'the objects and rhythms of everyday life in the present would become the primary inspiration and source for her work' and notes, as an aside, that '(she didn't seem to care about the experiments of her peers)'.<sup>31</sup> On the contrary, I will show that, in the range of inspirations for her work, the situation it occupies on the field and its relation to the other forces which structure that field are primary inspirations, and that these include not only the experiments but also the positions of her peers in that '*space of position-takings*'.

### **Reading Stein on the field of cultural production**

This thesis, returning to the scene in which Stein's practice engages, theorises her writing itself as actively invested and intervening in the cultural field and the institutions which shape it. The method I use is an integrated approach which puts the work into context as the product of its engagements with the institutions of the market, the academy, and 'modernism' and reads it as both formal and gestural action on the field. As is the case in Karen Leick's book on Stein, the reduced emphasis on the aesthetic properties of modernist works in favour of the contexts of production and reception is a significant consequence of the socio-cultural approach. In approaching Stein in this way, Leick follows Rainey, who discusses the sociology of modernist cultural production rather than the texts themselves. Rainey himself makes this clear in his defence of this practice:

One omission of this study needs to be acknowledged. Some readers, especially those with literary critical training, will find far too little of the detailed examination of actual works that is sometimes held to be the only important or worthwhile form of critical activity. I reject the idea that history or theory are acceptable only if they take on the role of humble handmaidens to the aesthetic artefact. Further, juxtaposing the analysis of specific works with discussion of institutional networks would encourage, however inadvertently, a vulgar materialism that I also disclaim.<sup>32</sup>

This commitment follows the integrity of a rigorous historical approach, but it leaves open the question of how the text itself is to be read. Indeed, if the scholarship which situates the range of practices conceptualised as 'modernism' back into their socio-cultural specificity does not discuss the writing, it also produces, to some extent, the binary between the literary text and its context that we have seen in the work on Stein.

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<sup>30</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Gertrude Stein: Selection*, ed. by Joan Retallack (Oakland: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>31</sup> Retallack, p.29; p.32.

<sup>32</sup> Rainey, p.6.

Whilst avoiding ‘vulgar materialism’, I think it is possible to read the text as a whole engagement with a rich and complex literary, artistic and institutional context and with the literary history within which it situates itself. I would also argue that this is particularly relevant to the works of this period, because, as I hope to show, they are explicitly engaged with the reformation or the construction of the contexts of production and reception which mediate, even designate, the function and value of the work of art. The reading I am advocating provides an integration of socio-cultural mapping and close textual analysis to read the texts as engagements with the field which work in multiple ways and forms. This has the potential to both counter the view that Stein’s work is avant-garde because it is exceptional, disjunctive or productively untimely, and to add to the body of Stein scholarship which, like the work of Goody and Galow, is developing a historicist approach which encounters the texts as aesthetic interventions operating in a specific socio-cultural context.

The series of arguments which position Stein as avant-garde represents one of the historical constellations with which this thesis engages. The accounts which write Stein into their history of the avant-garde are primary texts in my theorising of Stein’s historiography and its relations to the historiography of modernism. I will probe these arguments by taking Stein’s work back to her contemporary scene. Both institutionalised modernist icon and avant-garde post-modern precursor, Stein represents a pressure point in the articulation of the historical concepts of avant-garde, modernist, postmodern and in our view of the relations of the literary production of her period to the institutions which frame these concepts. In order to see the whole picture, I approach Stein’s work as a practice which is in itself both an engagement with and a record of the pursuit of a new set of relations on the field of cultural production. To this end, I will also discuss in detail not just Stein’s work as integrated with her activities and gestures, but also the practices, activities and performances of other figures and groups on that scene.

As I have indicated, the primary theoretical underpinning for my discussion is Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the field of cultural production. The model Bourdieu develops to express the nature of the literary field in late 19<sup>th</sup> Century France becomes in my discussion of Stein the basis for an understanding of the structure of the rather more international field modernism both occupies and constructs in the first half of the twentieth century (fig.1).

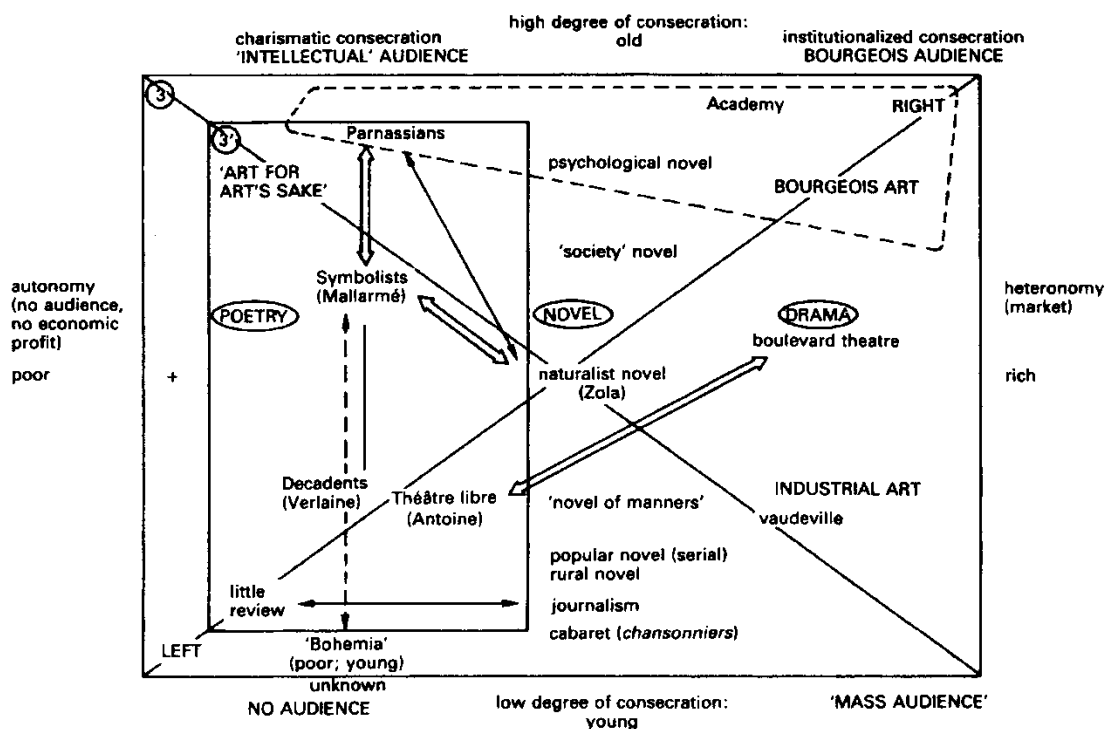


Figure 1: Bourdieu's model of the French literary field.<sup>33</sup>

The basic precept of my study of Stein in her milieu, in Bourdieu's terms, is that the scene upon which she acts and into which her work enters must be read as 'the network of objective relations' in which 'every position, even the dominant one, depends for its very existence, and for the determinations it imposes on its occupants, on the other positions constituting the field'.<sup>34</sup> Thus, I read Stein's literary production, and her related activity as an agent on the field, as engaging with and engaged by the other products, agents, and forces which make it up. An important adjunct to this is Bourdieu's characterisation of 'the literary or artistic field' as 'a *field of forces*' and 'a *field of struggles* tending to transform or conserve this field of forces' in which 'the generative, unifying principle of this "system" is the struggle' (30; 34). With this in mind, I also read Stein's works as purposeful deployments on the field of forces and as, explicitly, products of that struggle. The field is understood here as constituted by the position-takings, of and in relation to the apparatuses – the institutions, groups, networks, publication contexts and so on – which construct it. I am also interested in the explicit ways in which the field is consciously engaged with in the representations

<sup>33</sup> Bourdieu, p.49

<sup>34</sup> Bourdieu, p.30. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

and conceptualisations of the scene itself which are so prevalent in modernist literary and critical production. The desire to grasp the field itself which is revealed in modernist literary production is, likewise, a substantial stimulus for Stein's work. The aim of my method is to disclose the field by tracing the contexts of production and reception, the paratexts, the interactions, activities, gestures, and performances which surround the texts, but always in relation to the texts themselves, viewing the work as generating meaning in its interaction with these elements. Again, this follows Bourdieu's understanding of the work 'as a manifestation of the field as a whole, in which all the powers of the field, and all the determinisms inherent in its structure and functioning, are concentrated' (37). This method necessarily begs the question of how far the texts themselves corroborate the view of Stein as an isolate or exception in the history of literary modernism.

Another significant issue motivating this study is the question of what the signifier 'Gertrude Stein' denotes. Bourdieu begins his delineation of the field of cultural production with the reproach 'most analysts uncritically accept the division of the corpus that is imposed on them by the names of the authors' (29). The further contemporary scholarship moves from the approach Bourdieu critiques, in which the name of an author had signified a body of work as a discrete and coherent entity which could be analysed as such, the less satisfactory it is that 'Gertrude Stein' is deployed to name something fixed, authentic and distinct. For Bourdieu 'every literary field is the site of a struggle over the definition of the writer', and the struggle over what 'Gertrude Stein' names is just that (42). The wrangle over what her name denotes began in her own time and continues now, showing us how the battle over the definition of a writer has unfolded across time. The question of what constitutes a writer, and what constitutes poetry is, as we shall see in the final chapter, still very much a live debate, and one in which 'Gertrude Stein' is still a significant object.

The arguments for an avant-garde genealogy with an origin in Stein's work have a history of their own, and this history frames the thesis: it opens with an account of the arguments from Language poetry onwards, and closes with their present incarnation in conceptual writing. The examination of Stein's work and action in her milieu tests the hypothesis of the original historiography set out in Chapter 1, and runs through

Chapters 2, 3 and 4. The current form of the argument is then considered in Chapter 5, in the light of the evidence provided by this ‘return to the scene of the modern’.<sup>35</sup>

Chapter 1, ‘The Real Gertrude Stein’, outlines and analyses the concepts, approaches and methodologies which have, since the late 1970s, shaped the arguments for the ‘avant-garde’ Stein and her legacy for experimental poetry. The chapter begins with the late 1970s readings of Stein’s *Tender Buttons* by the Language poets, and traces the development of the narrative of an avant-garde genealogy through Charles Bernstein’s 1980s essays, Peter Quartermain’s 1992 *Disjunctive Poetics* and to Marjorie Perloff’s 2002 *Twenty-First Century Modernism*. This chapter focuses in particular on the ways in which Stein’s work is displaced from its cultural context in order for it to be read as avant-garde. It also considers Jennifer Ashton’s counter-argument, presented in her 2005 book *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century*, and argues that this text also maintains a conceptual approach which effaces the work’s specific cultural engagement. In the course of the chapter, I read two of Stein’s works, ‘Business in Baltimore’ and ‘What are Masterpieces and Why Are There so Few of Them’ as, contrary to the arguments I discuss, predicated on and formed by an acute awareness of and preoccupation with their cultural contexts.

Chapter 2, ‘Modernist Persona’ turns to the scene of Stein’s early experiments in the 1900s and 1910s in order to counter the claims that the work of this period is avant-garde because it is resistant to its cultural context. I discuss Stein’s portraits ‘Matisse’, ‘Picasso’, ‘Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia’ and ‘M. Cezanne et Vollard’ and their particular contexts of production and reception in order to show that, on the contrary, these texts operate as dynamic engagements with that context. With an emphasis on the institution of the market, the chapter considers the construction and commodification of Stein’s persona in relation to those figures she portrays. I argue that the portraits are active participations in their cultural milieu in their content, in their form and in their mode as interventions in an explicitly conceptualised ‘post-impressionist’ or ‘modernist’ marketplace. Thus, the early work seen in the avant-garde genealogy as resistant to commodity culture in its form and mode is re-read in context as an explicit engagement with the issue of the work of art as commodity.

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<sup>35</sup> See Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).



Chapter 3, 'Stein in the Academy', considers Stein's relationship to the academy, the institution which receives the most intense attention in the arguments for her exceptionalism. This chapter focuses on the lecture Stein gave in June 1926 at Cambridge and Oxford Universities respectively, and argues that this lecture, seen in context, problematizes the arguments which position Stein in direct and unequivocal opposition to the academy. I compare Stein's talk, published by the Hogarth Press as 'Composition as Explanation' later that year, with TS Eliot's 1919 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. Stein has so often been positioned in a dichotomous relationship to Eliot because he is seen as the representative of the 'academic' modernism against which her work is defined. I argue that, rather than demonstrating utterly antithetical positions, both texts in fact represent interventions into an institution which was beginning to take account of the changes in literary culture of the period. In the discussion, I draw on student reviews of Stein's lecture in order to show that it was an attempt, however provocative, to influence and shape the academic response to the new literary and artistic scene. Rather than representing a resistance to the academy, I contend that the lecture offers a new literary history, a 'history of the refused in the arts' which would enable that institution to engage positively and productively with contemporary innovation.

Chapter 4, 'Stein and the Death of Modernism', considers the crystallisation in the late 1920s of the 'institution' of modernism, and considers both the position Stein is ascribed and the position she takes in relation to that developing institution. It contextualises the writing of a literary history and a literary canon, by a number of writers in the period, for what is alternately termed 'revolutionary art', 'futurism' or 'modernism' and examines the place Stein is attributed in it. This chapter argues that, in the move to historicise and therefore conceptualise the movement in the late 1920s, Stein is configured as exemplary of the problems many writers felt they had to excise. This can be seen in a debate about the validity of Stein's work in a series of texts between 1926 and 1928: an anonymous review of 'Composition as Explanation' in the *New Criterion*, two articles written by TS Eliot, Wyndham Lewis's book *Time and Western Man*, John Rodker's essay 'The Future of Futurism', Laura Riding and Robert Graves's book *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* and a lecture on Stein given by Mina Loy at Natalie Barney's Paris salon. Whilst the initial review, Riding and Graves's book, and Loy's lecture are ostensibly positive about Stein's work, all of

these texts ultimately seek to conceptualise ‘revolutionary art’, ‘futurism’ or ‘modernism’ as something finished, and they all use Stein as the example of the movement which has ended or should end. In this chapter, I argue that Stein is presented as a cypher for those practices which might be deemed illegitimate or unacceptable in order to construct a legitimate face for the new art differentiated from the shocking or provocative forms so often mocked in the popular press. The chapter ends with a reading of Stein’s ‘The Fifteenth of November’, published in the *New Criterion*, as an expression of her sense of exclusion and as her attempt to intervene in order, once again, to participate in and influence a developing institution.

Chapter 5, ‘Gertrude Stein: Conceptual Writer’ returns to the arguments for Stein’s avant-garde legacy and considers their current manifestation in the proponents and scholars of conceptual writing. After examining the ways in which the avant-garde genealogy which includes Stein is reformulated in this recent incarnation, I focus my attention on *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. Using data analysis techniques to visualise the field of cultural production evoked in the paratextual apparatus of the anthology, I consider the way in which Stein is positioned and the way in which a developmental model, a literary history and a canon are constructed for a movement which predicates its avant-garde position on a resistance to the traditional notions of development, period and canon. This chapter then problematizes the underlying evolutionary logic constructed in the narrative which is indicated in the paratext and made explicit in Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin’s introductory essays, of a development through a historically proliferating literary canon. It does so primarily by reading it against the troubling of this paradigm in Stein’s 1926 text ‘Natural Phenomena’ and in the 2008 book *re:evolution* written by Kim Rosenfield, a poet who is included in the anthology. The chapter ends with an exploration of the relevance of Bourdieu’s notion of ‘degree specific consecration’, and argues that the anthology legitimises the works it includes through a process of mutual recognition which creates its own terms of validation chief of which is the opposition to mainstream or establishment legitimisation. In the light of my discussion of Stein in her context, I consider how far both conceptual writing and the earlier arguments for Stein’s avant-garde legacy need to read Stein *through* the late 1920s rewriting of her practice as illegitimate and exceptional in order to write a genealogy which is opposed to the mainstream.

# Chapter 1

## The Real Gertrude Stein

### Postmodern Stein: an origin for Language poetry

Since the late 1970s Gertrude Stein has been situated as the significant precursor for the forms of radical, innovative, experimental poetry which proclaim an opposition to the establishment lyric seen as the inheritance of modernism in its institutionalised form. It is Stein's work itself, read closely and directly, rather than her roles as collector and salonniere, that has provided the material upon which this claim is founded. Stein's revival as a writer whose practice is important rather than a personality whose social activity makes her significant was initially undertaken by the Language poets, who read Stein's work as an origin for their politically engaged 'resistant' writing. This loose group of writers, often seen as 'postmodern', and working through the late 1970s and into the 1990s, actively emphasised the reading of her work as opposed to the reading of her personality or connections, taking Stein out of the modernist scene and adopting her as their own.<sup>1</sup>

The introduction to the 1984 text *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, which reprinted a selection from the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, published between 1978 and 1982, defines Language poetry as a resistance to the 'commodity fetishism' in which words 'cease to be valued for what they are themselves but only for their properties as instrumentalities leading us to a world outside or beyond them' and in which language is therefore used to create 'a picture of a physical world that the reader can then consume as if it were a commodity'.<sup>2</sup> Influenced by Marxist literary theory and Post-structuralist theories of signification, reflected in the many references in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* to Marx's writings and those of Marxist theorists such as Gramsci, Jameson, and Althusser, and to the theories of Derrida, Barthes and

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<sup>1</sup> For Language poetry as postmodern, see Robert J Frank and Henry M Sayre, *The Line in Postmodern Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Marjorie Perloff, *Postmodern Genres* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989); *Postmodern Poetries*, ed. by Jerome McGann, *Verse 7:1 Special Issue*, (Spring 1990); Jennifer Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, 'Repossessing the Word' in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), pp.ix-xi, (p.x).

Lacan, the work of Language poetry ‘does not involve turning language into a commodity for consumption; instead, it involves repossessing the sign through close attention to, and active participation in, its production’.<sup>3</sup> Language poetry is presented as an alternative to the cultural hegemony which instrumentalises and commodifies language, and Stein’s work is read through this lens as an early example of a practice which resists the logic of commodification and enables the repossession of the sign. Thus, for the Language poets, Stein is ahead of her time because she anticipates their language-centred resistance to the institution of the market.

The primary text for this group is Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, written in 1912 and published in book form in 1914. In *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, *Tender Buttons* is assigned a prominent position. The book is divided into three sections: ‘Poetics and Language’, ‘Writing and Politics’, and ‘Readings’. The third section consists mainly of contemporary poets responding to each other’s work, but it opens with three poems from *Tender Buttons*, ‘A Carafe, that is a Blind Glass’, ‘Glazed Glitter’, and ‘Roastbeef’. This selection is followed with ‘readings’ by the poets Michael Davidson, Larry Eigner, Bob Perelman, Steve McCaffery, Peter Seaton, Jackson Mac Low and Robert Grenier. Stein’s work is the only example of poetry in the collection not written by a contemporary writer. Situated like this, together with the Language poets’ subsequent reciprocal readings of each other’s work – Charles Bernstein reads Johanna Drucker, Johanna Drucker reads Marshall Reese, Barrett Watten reads Robert Grenier, Steve McCaffery reads Michael Palmer, and so on – the responses to Stein’s poems, I would argue, perform the action of drawing her into a contemporary network of mutual validation. Their location at the opening of this section, however, also hints at a chronology, one which moves directly from *Tender*

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. For Marxist and Post-structuralist theory in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, see, for example, Ron Silliman, ‘Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World’, pp. 121-133; Bruce Andrews, ‘Writing Social Work & Political practice’, pp. 133-136; Bruce Boone, ‘Writing, Power and Activity’, pp. 140-145, John Leo, ‘/CAPITAL/ /WRITING/’, pp. 156-157, etc. The political project of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing is perhaps exemplified in Silliman’s closing paragraph: ‘By recognising itself as the philosophy of practice in language, poetry can work to search out the preconditions of post-referential language within the existing social fact. This requires (1) recognition of the historic nature and structure of referentiality, (2) placing the issue of language, the repressed element at the center of the program, and (3) placing the program into the context of conscious class struggle. Such poetry will take as its motto the words of Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: “The social revolution...cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future”’ (131).

*Buttons* to the contemporary texts, and this arrangement assigns another position to her work: that of a precedent for the writing which follows.<sup>4</sup>

The poets' responses to the *Tender Buttons* texts in themselves also direct their attention to the contemporary situation from which they are read by offering apparently unmediated engagements in the form of either narrowly focused close readings, poems which respond directly to the experience of reading the texts, or generically indeterminate essay-poems which function in both ways. The sense of Stein's inclusion in this contemporary network is also heightened because the later readings of the contemporary writers' work deploy the same variety of forms as the reading of *Tender Buttons*. As well as including her in a mutually affirming network of authors and practices, therefore, this also serves to flatten the historical distance which divides them by eliding any distinction between a text written in 1912 and one written in 1979. Stein therefore becomes both precursor and contemporary, suggesting that the time between her work and theirs can be collapsed; in short, that Language poetry picks up directly where Stein left off. As we will see later, this reflects their view that the literary history which did not emerge out of Stein's experimental work is a history they want to reject.

The foregrounding in these readings of the contemporary value of Stein's work is achieved in two ways: first, in that heightened sense of a direct engagement with the text in which it is seen as an immediate experience, and, second, in an emphasis on the loss of the context in which *Tender Buttons* was originally written. Indeed, in many of the readings, both of these attitudes to the work are invoked simultaneously. The readings therefore construct a relation between the disappearance of that historical time and the immediate contemporary presence of the text. The significance of this can be seen in Bob Perelman's reading: 'in places I wonder if she hears/sees/thinks the word just before or as she writes it – or only after'.<sup>5</sup> Perelman's use of the present tense to consider the mystery of Stein's writing process at once precipitates that writing process into the present and indicates the permanent absence of the moment in which it was written – he can never know how she wrote the text.

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<sup>4</sup> The section ends with four responses to Zukovsky, situating Stein and Zukovsky, as Peter Quartermain later does, as the significant modernist originators of this poetic.

<sup>5</sup> Bob Perelman's untitled response to Stein in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* pp.199-200 (p.200).

Thus, the immediate experience of engaging with the text and its processes is prioritised, and Stein is, in this way, pulled into the present of Language poetry. Both these aspects serve to weight the reading of Stein's works in terms of their contemporary recuperation. This practice points to a crucial aspect of Stein's value as a precursor for Language poetry: the idea that Stein's work answers to such direct and unmediated contact and can therefore relinquish its historical situatedness. The kind of primary access Stein's writing seems to enable supports the conviction that the meaning of the work is not determined by its context. For the Language poets it is the originating example of a resistance to the logic of 'commodity fetishism' and its 'instrumentalities'. *Tender Buttons* is read as a discrete object which enables and rewards a direct and decontextualized engagement because its meanings are not fixed by this instrumentalised, commodifying relationship to language. It is therefore exemplary of the resistant and decommodified writing to which their poetic aspires.

The first mode, of engaging with the poem as a direct experience in the present moment, is perhaps most apparent in Larry Eigner's 'A Carafe...Glazed Glitter Roastbeef (through a glass darkly)'. Its oblique references to the Stein text offer a reading of her work as something encountered as a facet of his own moment in contemporary America. This is exemplified in Eigner's opening line, 'Ok murky in after all end, unpredictable day, with rain shine any degree night, the sun kin warm and hot', which reworks the *Tender Buttons* poem printed on the first page of the 'readings' section 'A Carafe, that is a Blind Glass':

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.<sup>6</sup>

Eigner's text has the quality of a palimpsest in which his immediate experiences – in this instance, of the weather and the everyday discourse of the weather report – lie across the time of reading Stein, and it is through them that her language, her syntax and her processes emerge. These are expressed in the relation between Stein's 'the difference is spreading' and Eigner's 'unpredictable' difference between 'murky' and

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<sup>6</sup> Larry Eigner 'A Carafe...Glazed Glitter Roastbeef (through a glass darkly)', in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, pp.198-199 (p.198); Gertrude Stein, 'A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass', in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, p.195.

‘shine’. His references to ‘sun’ and to ‘hot’ evoke the shine of Stein’s ‘system to pointing’ and the heat of her ‘single hurt color’ and his elision of ‘kinda’ to ‘kin’ draws together the relations between her ‘kind’ and ‘cousin’. This draws our attention to the system of relations to which both texts allude: that of language itself. Thus, Stein’s text is embedded in the context of Eigner’s experience, which is treated as an experience of and in language, and her work is confronted as an aspect of that experience.

This kind of immediacy is a characteristic of all the responses to Stein assembled in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, and it is often accompanied by the sense that these are provisional readings, for example in Jackson Mac Low’s opening ‘I start reading “A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass.” I go from word to word’, which sees the text as the direct experience of a particular moment whose meaning is pieced together in real time. Mac Low’s exclamation, ‘The whole poem suddenly seems to be about seeing!’ implies a temporary response in which what the poem is about alters rapidly from one moment to the next.<sup>7</sup> Bob Perelman’s cautious ‘I can hook up my intuition with what I guess was hers’ has the reader in an uncertain search for meaning, a tentative groping for common ground based on guesswork and remaining conditional.<sup>8</sup> The reading of Stein is conceived of as a process of present-tense and contingent rumination, an immersion in the text with a strong sense of the contemporary context in which that immersion takes place. This occurs across all the readings, from Robert Grenier’s note-form ‘Ok, “tender” because new-born – & all right, word-buds, tenderly regarded’ to Michael Davidson’s urgent question ‘What’s the good of all this?’, which uses the interrogative form that occurs in many of the other responses.<sup>9</sup> Seemingly enabling such a decontextualisation because of their resistance to interpretation, Stein’s texts float, unbound and undefined, in the moment of the reader’s engagement, objects which interact temporarily with the context of each reading. Stein’s work, read this way, is never subsumed, and continues to have an afterlife which is predicated precisely on its escape from its context, its resistance to meanings which can be fixed to any time.

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<sup>7</sup> Jackson Mac Low, ‘Reading a Selection from *Tender Buttons*’, in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, pp.202-204, (p.202; p.203).

<sup>8</sup> Perelman, p.200.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Grenier, ‘Tender Buttons’, in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, pp.204-207, (p.205); Michael Davidson, ‘On Reading Stein’, in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, pp.196-198, (p.197).

This sense that Stein's own context is irrecoverable is a significant aspect of Language poetry's claim on Stein, as expressed in Robert Grenier's contribution, simply titled 'Tender Buttons'. The second paragraph opens with: 'Sad story, now, apparently. Real im Traum, "before the war." Today, a hearkening back, as longing, not the reality of the word, not the faith that makes composition of the world, riding on that everything, permission given. She could say anything'.<sup>10</sup> This reading emphasises the contemporary moment in its attention to the act of looking back to Stein's lost context. The present time of reading is accentuated because the 'sad story' of the text has occurred after its composition, and, therefore has only become 'apparent' from the point of view of the present which now reads it as loss. The current 'hearkening back' or 'longing' for the early-twentieth-century context of *Tender Buttons*, in which everything was cast into doubt and therefore anything seemed possible, ('she could say anything') is presented as evidence of its utter loss. Grenier's emphasis is therefore on the present moment, the 'now', the 'today', in which the texts remain as the residue of that loss, crystallising a moment whose promise was never fulfilled. In this sense Stein's text is betrayed by history. As in all these readings, I would argue, it is therefore the story of her recuperation, the drawing of Stein into a present which understands what was lost, which is valorised.

These readings reveal that, for the Language poets, the historical context for Stein's work is inadequate to it, and that it is the contemporary knowledge of that inadequacy which means that Stein is read in that present moment, and by these writers, with a greater force than in her own period. This position on Stein enables the Language poets to move what they see as the radical early history of modernism, in which 'permission' was given to challenge the 'faith that makes composition of the world', forward to their time, which in turn enables Language poetry to be conceived as a continuation of that radical project. This narrative, as I will show in this chapter, has been sustained and developed by the proponents of 'experimental' or 'innovative' poetry throughout the 1980s and 1990s and into the twenty-first century.

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<sup>10</sup> Grenier, p.204.



The notion of a history which has read Stein inadequately is articulated as a key argument for the value of the kind of experimental writing represented in Language poetry by Charles Bernstein, the editor, along with Bruce Andrews, of *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* and a significant figure in the group. In much of his theoretical writing of the 1980s, he explicitly posits Stein as an originator for a poetic whose promise had thus far remained unfulfilled. In his 1983 essay 'Words and Pictures', he offers a comparison of the relative development of poetry and visual art and suggests that visual art has followed a meaningful trajectory from modernism which poetry has not. He adds:

This is not to say that on individual terms *Tender Buttons* is not fully comparable to *Les Femmes d'Alger* or Wassily Kandinsky's abstract compositions. But work such as Stein's remained largely unknown in comparison to work such as Picasso's or Kandinsky's. While a dominant practice in painting eventually followed in directions related to the work of these two painters, this is not as true for writing in respect to the work of Stein'.<sup>11</sup>

The direct parallel Bernstein draws between Stein's work and that of Picasso and Kandinsky – it is 'fully comparable' – serves to underscore what is in his view the inadequacy of the development of poetry and provides the basis of an argument for an alternative writing which has a greater validity than the 'dominant practice' that has not followed the direction of Stein's work. This notion of the unfulfilled legacy of Stein's modernism (and, again, *Tender Buttons* is the key text for him) as the unrecognised 'largely unknown' but authentic strand in the development from modernism is set against what he later calls 'the vapid intellectualisation of the academic verse of the period' which he attributes to 'Eliot's influence (the "great disaster of our letters" as [William Carlos] Williams called it) and the rise of the New Criticism'.<sup>12</sup> In another essay in the same collection, Bernstein calls this the 'schism in American literary culture', arguing that what 'characterises the officially sanctioned verse of our time, no less than Williams's, is a restricted vocabulary, neutral and univocal tone in the guise of voice or persona, grammar-book syntax, received conceits, static and unitary form'.<sup>13</sup> The claim on Stein, therefore, means that Language poetry is not the formation of a new alternative poetic but an assertion that one already exists, one which has suffered a marginalisation in favour of the

<sup>11</sup> Charles Bernstein, 'Words and Pictures', in *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984*, pp.114-165 (pp.132-33).

<sup>12</sup> Bernstein, p.155.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Bernstein, 'The Academy in Peril: William Carlos Williams Meets the MLA', in *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984*, pp.244-252 (p.246; p.245).

‘officially sanctioned’ poetry which does not represent a development out of the experimental origins of modernism. The mainstream tradition, for which this argument locates an origin in Eliot and the New Critics, is presented as the product of institutionalisation in many forms: the ‘academic’ the ‘official’, that which is ‘sanctioned;’ the ‘restricted vocabulary’ and ‘univocal tone’ which imply a doctrine for language use and narrative perspective; the rules of the ‘grammar-book’ of childhood education and the ‘received conceits’ which indicate the handing down of models for mimesis. Indeed, it is its institutionalisation which invalidates this writing, in that it precludes any attempt at the radical experimentation with form which Bernstein sees as the inheritance of Stein’s modernism.

The argument for alternative modernisms gained currency through the 1990s and has formed an important basis for the development of the New Modernist Studies in the last 30 years in the expansion of modernism’s temporal and cultural boundaries, and in the recuperation of marginalised works, authors and, indeed, geographies for modernism.<sup>14</sup> This future for modernism studies is advocated perhaps most vigorously in Raymond Williams’s 1987 injunction:

If we are to break out of the non-historical fixity of post-modernism, then we must search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century, a tradition which may address itself not to this by now exploitable because quite inhuman rewriting of the past but, for all our sakes, to a modern future in which community may be imagined again.<sup>15</sup>

The solution to the historical bind created by post-war modernism, as he says earlier, that of being ‘stuck in the post’, has in this argument a chance of resolution in the act of reaching back into the past to find an alternative tradition which can tell history differently in order to free western literary culture from the ‘non-historical fixity’ created by modernism’s hegemony. Much of this impulse can already be seen in Charles Bernstein’s claims on Stein as the origin for such an alternative tradition. In Bernstein’s argument, this alternative tradition seems to have avoided that ‘non-historical fixity’ because it can simultaneously call itself ‘post-modern’ and claim an origin in the history of modernism.

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of this development, see Douglas Mao and Rebecca L Walkowitz, ‘Introduction: Modernisms Bad and New’, in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. by Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz (Durham: Duke University Press) 2006, pp.1-17.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, ‘When Was Modernism?’ p.35.

I would argue, however, that over the course of the next two decades the development of this narrative for Stein, and for a post-modernism rooted in the modernism left in the margins, throws up more problems than it resolves. In particular, as we shall see, the arguments which remove Stein from the sanctioned version of literary history and recuperate her for the purposes of contemporary experimental poetry begin to contradict a Marxist project of literary history which would, in Williams's injunction, serve to relocate those 'neglected' works in their historical moment and thus assign to them a validity for a literary history not overshadowed by the 'post-war settlement'. The indications of this contradiction can already be seen in the way in which the Language poets appear to precipitate Stein into the late twentieth century in order to posit her writing as a direct experience which requires no contextualisation. Indeed, the way Stein is brought into the present implies that her work could not properly be read in its original context; that, rather than belonging to the time of its writing, it belongs, in fact, to the future.

### **Disjunctive Stein: tracing an alternative 'tradition'**

This problematic methodology of decontextualisation as a resistance to the legacy of what is perceived as a hegemonic modernism is fully theorised as an argument for an alternative poetics with its origins in Stein's work in Peter Quartermain's 1992 book *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe*. The position set out by Bernstein in 1983 and indicated in Williams's 1987 exhortation is taken as the basis for an alternative literary history. In Quartermain's argument, the line he traces from Stein stands permanently outside history as a resistant mode which cannot be assimilated into any cultural hegemony. The necessity of contesting the perceived modernist institution evoked in Raymond Williams's discussion, and of escaping the 'historical fixity' it has engendered, becomes a defining principle in Quartermain's poetry of resistance, which is read as a challenge to any form of institutionalisation. For him, Stein's writing exemplifies a 'sort of modernism' characterised by 'disjunctive writing' which is 'recalcitrant to description'. He reads Stein's practice as disjunctive because it produces poems which attain the status of the 'decontextualized object'. This presents her work as resistant because 'such objects are difficult to read', in that they 'challenge our assumptions about the processes of

reading, about what constitutes “value”, about “knowledge” and about “knowing””.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Stein’s poems are radically disjunctive because they cannot be translated into existing frames of reference. The resistant text presents itself at each reading as if it were read for the first time, and because it cannot be resolved by being interpreted through established ways of making meaning, it challenges the ways meaning is sought and made each time it is read. As Quartermain says:

In thinking of poems as objects, not only does the writer have no control over what the poem might mean to its reader, but the ground of meaning is shifted from what perhaps had best be called a series of cultural imperatives...to the very act of reading itself. Value is thus shifted from artefact to process.

Quartermain goes on to add that ‘cultural baggage seriously impedes the act of reading...by fostering confusion between historical (or economic or whatever) fact and “poetic fact”’ (16). This calls for a reading of Stein which deals only with the fact of the text itself and therefore divorces it from its historical context. The culture within which the text was originally produced thus becomes unnecessary ‘baggage’ which stands between the reader and the work rather than enabling an understanding of it as a product of its own historical moment. The problem with this, beyond the simple impossibility of a text produced in such a rarefied manner, is that it comes dangerously close to the separation of poetry into the kind of elite sphere these arguments seek to critique when they reject the literary history of institutionalised modernism.

This understanding of Stein’s poetry and of the work of other poets Quartermain includes in the genealogy he traces proposes that the kind of reading they demand creates a cultural and historical vacuum in which the engagement with the poem is the experience of a stripping away of enculturated ways of reading and making meaning. The writer is also, in this paradigm, detached from the meaning of the poem because the poem has become an autonomous entity in the historical vacuum it creates. This is problematic in that it cuts the poem adrift from both the historical moment of its making and the historical moment in which it is read. The poem, in Quartermain’s argument, embodies a resistance to any context because it creates a sealed world of ““poetic fact,”” standing outside human time in its eternal refusal to be interpreted as something which has a finite meaning for a particular moment. For Quartermain,

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<sup>16</sup> Quartermain, p.2. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Stein's work cannot be synthesised because it defies interpretation, and it is therefore resistant to the cultural hegemony which would assimilate it. This ascribes to Stein's work a permanent characteristic of resistance which, whilst it acts as a way of recuperating her work out of the hegemonic narrative which has apparently erased it, still sustains the erasure it contests. This, I would argue, leaves the real work of recuperation undone, because instead of following the logic of Williams's mandate by putting Stein back into a literary history in which her work has been marginalised, Quartermain's approach removes her from history altogether.

Quartermain's concept of resistance is therefore predicated on a Stein removed from her historical context, and this is reflected in his approach to her work. In his readings of Stein, he moves across her work from *Tender Buttons* (1912) to *Lifting Belly* (1917) to *Patriarchal Poetry* (1927), and from 'Four Dishonest Ones' (1911) to 'A Little Novel' (1927) in order to develop his argument about Stein's techniques and processes. This method, along with the assertion that the 'indeterminacy of meaning' which he proposes as the central function of Stein's work 'is as true of her work of 1912 as it is of that of 1928 and later' is problematic in that it presents the work in a self-referential vacuum which bears no relation to the cultural context in which each individual text was produced (23). What makes this all the more contradictory is that it has more in common with the emphasis on the purity of the text urged by IA Richards and other proponents of Practical Criticism and, later, the New Criticism of Williams's 'post-war settlement', than with Williams's own desire to reassert – or to reinsert – the texts which have been erased from history by that hegemony. Indeed, this escape from literary history by binding the text to an abstract notion of a permanent set of values – here, disjunctiveness – replicates the problematic logic Williams decries in his condemnation of the canonisation of a particular form of modernism and 'its accompanying, complicit academic endorsements' in which 'Modernism' has come to denote a 'highly selective field'.

This notion of Stein's work as a sealed and disjunctive entity is also articulated in the conclusions Quartermain comes to, that 'the writing...demands very little acculturation of its readers' a quality which he characterises as a 'marked contrast to the practice of Stein's contemporaries like Joyce, say, or Eliot'. For Quartermain,

Stein is exceptional because she, unlike her contemporaries, ‘deliberately excludes such cultural apparatus’ (41). This view of Stein’s oeuvre suggests that the work is indeterminate because it resists any engagement with culture as such at all. This view is a highly questionable one, and one which is directly contradicted by the work itself, which I would argue is often predicated on a critical participation in the mechanisms of culture in its explorations of the relationship between culture, language and consciousness.

Stein’s 1925 text ‘Business in Baltimore’, for example, presents a significant engagement with the cultural context of the mercantile Baltimore cousins on whom Stein, rather uncomfortably, relied for financial support. As Ulla Dydo points out, as the site of the family business, run by the Stein men, ‘Baltimore spells business and business spells money’.<sup>17</sup> The text is a negative representation of the male-dominated business world as a system which accounts for and creates an understanding of all aspects of life, of time and space, of individuals and relationships. As such, ‘Business in Baltimore’ is a direct engagement with a cultural context and this is its function as poetry: as an investigative embodiment of its logic. Stein is indeed critical of this example of capitalist culture, but, rather than emerging as a by-product of a linguistic practice of indeterminacy resistant to historical fixity, it is achieved in a precise engagement with a very specific instance.

In the Baltimore culture Stein’s work embodies, time is controlled and circumscribed, as exemplified in the lines “This is why they have every reason to be arranged and every morning to be morning and every evening to be evening. This is the reason why they have every Sunday and Tuesday and Monday”.<sup>18</sup> Here, the tedious pace of time bounded by rules and routine, measured and accounted for, is emphasised in the repetition of ‘every’ and the relentless use of simple conjunctions. Similarly, ‘How may days pay, how much of a day pays and how differently from thinking’ presents time divided and measured more explicitly in terms of monetary value. The carping rhyme of ‘how may days pay’ leaves an impression of the nagging emptiness of a culture engaged with life on a primarily mercenary level, and it contrasts with the

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<sup>17</sup> Ulla Dydo *A Stein Reader*, p.479.

<sup>18</sup> Gertrude Stein, ‘Business in Baltimore’, in *A Stein Reader* pp.479-490 (p.480). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

variety of sound and the syllabic complexity of the wry criticism ‘and how differently from thinking’(481). The sense of restriction and confinement is also conferred on notions of space, which is ‘divided’ or ‘connected’, serving a purpose, providing constrained channels of movement hedged around with ‘doors and floors’. Similarly, the question ‘How many places for scales are there in it’ gives the impression that space is valued for its business use (480). The constant use of quantifiers: ‘more’; ‘many’; ‘much’ and numbers ‘two kinds finds’; ‘he did and three he did and see he did and three’; ‘how many generations make five’ suggest that matter, objects, the stuff of the world is understood, in the terms of the counting house, as that which can be quantified (480; 481). This impression is compounded by a repetitive section which dwells on the paperwork of the business transaction, beginning: ‘How many papers can make more papers’. Individuals are also subjected to the system ‘if another marries her brother, if another marries their brother, if their brother marries another’ and so on, which arranges individuals and their relationships in order to pursue its own ends, asking another quantitative question: ‘how many pairs are there of it’(481).

As the text progresses it becomes more repetitive, more insistent and less varied, almost as if Stein is being drawn in to the essence of the system, finding its rhythm and its core components. The paragraph of repetitive variations on ‘Business in Baltimore makes a wedding at first’ suggests generations of family connections engendered by and engendering business (482). The structures of intimate social relationships are governed by a business model of consolidation and production, moving ever onward but without change through a series of reproductions. At times the text is overwhelmed by the repetition of the title ‘Business in Baltimore’, with minute shifts and variations in the use of conjunctions, determiners and verb tenses, each of which prescribes another area of control (484). The effect is of a web, a skein, or a field of meaning which covers all possibilities. Stein’s text feels what it is like to inhabit this worldview, and the continuum of space and time is signified by this accounting more and more insistently as the text progresses in the accretion of references to the city as a mapped space of ‘streets, corners, places’ and ‘streets, corners, connections’ and the repetitive return to the question ‘How many’ (488). The processes of mapping, counting and accumulation come to overtly dominate the text as it becomes more explicitly a map of meaning in which these are the only points of reference.

Towards the end of the text this totalising categorisation becomes more and more insistent. Having written it through to its innermost structure and reduced it to its essential features, Stein's text appears to find the base processes which determine the map of meaning which constructs the culture of her Baltimore cousins. These processes, reduced and denuded, Stein presents in the final section of the text as the repetition of the words 'yes', 'and', 'better', 'best', 'more' and 'most' (489-490). It is a model of meaning whose points of reference are acceptance ('yes'), continuation ('and'), competition ('better', 'best') and increase ('more', 'most'). The predominance of the phrase 'and yes' foregrounds the processes of agreement, affirmation, and acceptance, and this emphasises the basic nature of the system as one which refuses nothing and subsumes everything. It is, therefore inherently a system of accumulation, and it is this factor which is articulated through all of its processes. What Stein's text discovers in its sustained attention to those processes is that accumulation is the machine which drives this culture.

Far from being detached or aloof from her cultural context, Stein, as this work shows, is critically engaged with it, both on the micro level of individual voices and experiences and on the macro level of the functioning of a cultural system and the field of meaning it creates. Indeed, as we have seen here, her writing is directly concerned with the relations between individual consciousness and culture and, as we shall see later, Stein, far from being an exception, is in this and in many other respects in line with her contemporary scene.

Quartermain's approach to Stein's work makes her into the exception from modernism and in itself creates the conditions for her work to stand outside the cultural contexts in which it was written and in which it is read. The methodology Quartermain chooses has his argument, that Stein's work can never be legitimised or accepted because it will always remain disjunctive, that it is 'resistant to institutionalised power and meaning' already presupposed (Quartermain, 43). In this way, the decontextualisation of Stein's work is claimed as a mechanism internal to the work itself, derived from its defining property of encoding a perpetual challenge to hegemony. For Quartermain, and for the Language poets, what they see as this inherent function of Stein's work is raised to the level of an ideological principle.



Because this function is posited as inherent to the work, however, the decontextualized reading is also construed as the appropriate way to read Stein, making Quartermain's approach and the Language poets' readings, not simply political acts predicated on their desire for a resistant poetic, but, in sympathy with Dydo's 1993 argument, the *authentic* mode in which to respond to her work.

Much rests upon this method, because it presents Stein as the originator for an alternative poetic which follows the same practice of disjunction and which, therefore, can never be either subsumed by or replace the institution it resists. Indeed, in Quartermain's presentation this alternative practice is predicated upon a resistance to any form or process of institutionalisation. Following that premise, to posit a mainstream hegemonic poetry in opposition to this alternative strand, as both Bernstein and Quartermain do, is to define a poetry which has as its very mode the resistance to the norms such hegemony imposes. The problem here is that the alternative strand or "line" in this sense depends upon the institution for its existence. This aspect of the argument also determines the ways in which the alternative is defined – as a line or strand rather than a tradition. It becomes necessary that it is described as such because tradition is a central instrument of institutionalisation in that it represents a set of established ideas and norms which are handed down. Quartermain's argument, that 'it is extremely difficult to talk of Stein's "disciples" or even of her "imitators"...It is not even a tradition of forms, or of formal concerns. Even with the wisdom of hindsight, one cannot predict, say, a Susan Howe from a Gertrude Stein', posits a tradition which resists the normal processes (8). Indeed, Quartermain makes a resistance to tradition itself an explicit necessity for its alterity. When he says, 'I hesitate to call this a tradition; that word usually refers to a set of beliefs informing social or political programmes, or even adherence to sets of formal principles' and 'above all else it refuses to be programmatic', he posits a mechanical, imitative or derivative version of tradition which emphasises its institutionalising role (3). Thus, Quartermain's 'line' occupies in the awkward and contradictory position of a tradition which is defined by being antagonistic to the very concept of tradition.

In an echo of both Bernstein's argument and Grenier's presentation of the mourning of a lost opportunity, the establishment poetry Quartermain decries, defined as

characterised by ‘semantic singularity’, transmits a model for imitation which does not reflect the break with tradition which Stein’s modernism seemed to promise. In setting Stein’s legacy against this, he predicates the whole value of her work on the resistance to institutionalisation. Following the logic of the Language poets’ political project, the decontextualisation of the work and the reading of it as resistant to institutionalising forms and processes go hand in hand as representations of the main functions of Stein’s practice. Once again, according to this argument, to understand Stein’s texts as unbound to their cultural context is to understand them correctly.<sup>19</sup>

I would argue that the act of removing Stein’s work from its context has, therefore, several values for Language poetry. First, it protests against the reductive tendency to see Stein purely in terms of her salon, her collections and her personality, thus returning the reader to the work itself. Second, it has a political function of determining the meaning of Stein’s work in terms of its resistance to the institutionalised, establishment meanings of its context. Third, it provides a way of counterposing an alternative ‘tradition’ founded on a methodology of experimentation which resists the institutionalising function of the mainstream tradition. Finally, without being explicit, it confers the status of ‘avant-garde’ on Stein’s work and the work of those ‘postmodern’ poets who follow her example. If Stein is not appreciated in her time, it is because she is ahead of her time. The act of recuperation therefore in itself confers this status: Stein can come into her own in the future which has become the present of Language poetry. This reveals the significance of the present-tense recuperative readings of Stein’s texts in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*.

Like the Language poets, however, Quatremain must avoid the term ‘avant-garde’ which, since Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* had, for them, come to signify a fixed historical moment in the development of art. In Quatremain’s discussion the category of the disjunctive text is essentially invented to stand in for the category of the avant-garde, in that it signifies a work whose meaning comes directly from its

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<sup>19</sup> Quatremain also distinguishes the personal from the cultural provenance of Stein’s work, stressing the significance of the immediate personal context as evidence of the way in which the work restores the connection between art and life: ‘As an act of testimony the poem is anchored firmly in the compositional moment of the poet’s life, including accidentals immediately to hand, and it incorporates into itself its surrounding events...If the poem is true to its own history (the history of its own composition) then necessarily the poem is error free’ (8).

overt disruption of the norms of meaning-making it confronts. Like Bernstein, Quartermain also juxtaposes a contemporary establishment with the alternative strand he proposes, describing it as ‘the recurrent collision in twentieth-century American poetics’, which he conceptualises as a conflict between ‘semantic singularity and multiplicity’ (9). Indeed, Quartermain’s elaboration of this category brings it even closer to Bürger’s classic definition of the avant-garde. Quartermain’s characterisation of this disjunctive function as that which can ‘open the poem to registering and attending to areas of experience hitherto deemed unworthy of literary attention...denying traditional distinctions between poetry and “life”’ significantly echoes Bürger’s argument that project of the historical avant-garde movements was to achieve the ‘return of art to the praxis of life’.<sup>20</sup>

Quartermain’s complication of tradition, however, gives the notion of a resistant current another historical form. Whereas Bernstein proposes a marginalised alternative tradition, Quartermain is able to use the category of disjunctiveness to posit an ahistorical poetic which can be characterised not so much in terms of development, but rather in terms of resurgence. His use of the word ‘recurrent’ reflects this position, as does his description of the poems he discusses as ‘manifestation(s) of a mode’. This argument, in which the decontextualisation which is a matter of principle is also a mechanism of the work itself (its mode), is put forward to enable a poetic freed from history in which the text always functions in the present because it is an experience of language which can never dissolve into any culturally constructed hegemonic meanings. I would argue, therefore, that this shift in attention away from Stein’s ‘international visitors’ (Mellow), her ‘personality’ or her ‘presence’ (Wilson) in her own period and towards the reading of her work alone and in a historical vacuum thus has an ideological function: it is the basis of the construction of an alternative literary history. As a way out of Raymond Williams’s postmodern bind, Stein’s work is presented as eternally disruptive, and this literary history is constructed as that tradition which is an escape from tradition, a disjunctive poetry which escapes history. This argument for the experimental poetic Quartermain champions thus enables the Stein it requires: a decontextualised Stein out of which a dehistoricised version of literary history can be originated.

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<sup>20</sup> Quartermain, p.3; Bürger, p.49.

### **Avant-garde Stein: the origin for an unfinished modernism**

This vision of Stein's legacy has continued into the twenty-first century. Marjorie Perloff's 2002 book *Twenty-First Century Modernism* traces a lineage, as Quartermain does, from Stein through Objectivism to Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian and Steve McCaffery. The position is developed, however, in a way which simultaneously makes a more explicit use of the category of the avant-garde, offers a more historically located claim for an alternative tradition, and is able to eliminate altogether what Perloff calls the 'tired dichotomy' expressed in the category of postmodernism. As the title intimates, Perloff shifts the argument and reconfigures the terms in order to claim that modernism is not a finished project. In Perloff's version, the postmodernism of the Language poets and those who have since claimed allegiance to what she calls the "experimental" or "innovative" or "oppositional" or "alternative" poetries in the US and other Anglophone nations' is simply the authentic inheritance of modernism's original avant-garde intent.<sup>21</sup>

The book opens by setting out a premise which once again reproduces the logic of Raymond Williams's argument in order to frame a rereading of literary history against the grain. Perloff declares 'What strikes us when we reread the poetries of the early twentieth century is that the real fate of first-stage modernism was one of deferral' and she asks 'what if, despite the predominance of a tepid and unambitious Establishment poetry, there were a powerful avant-garde that takes up, once again, the experimentation of the early twentieth century?'. Like Quartermain, Perloff finds an origin for contemporary experimental writing in the 'sort of' modernism exemplified for her by Stein, a 'materialist poetic which is increasingly our own – a poetic that seems much more attuned...to the non-generic, non-representational texts of Gertrude Stein' (3-4).<sup>22</sup> Perloff's conception proposes a narrative which does indeed offer what Williams calls an 'alternative tradition' which circumvents the 'post-war settlement' in order to claim this contemporary experimental poetics as the direct inheritor of

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<sup>21</sup> Perloff, *Twenty-First Century Modernism*, p.1. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>22</sup> Perloff also situates Marcel Duchamp, Victor Khlebnikov and an early 'avant-garde' TS Eliot in this history.

what Perloff defines as a 'short-lived' radical modernism largely killed, stifled or repressed soon after its advent in the early twentieth century (3).

In Perloff's argument, the suppression of the modernist avant-garde by the New Critical 'orthodoxy' has led to the 'unambitious' stuff that 'passes for poetry today' (2; 4; 5).<sup>23</sup> Dealing more directly with the categories which trouble Raymond Williams and which underlie Quartermain's discussion, Perloff explicitly challenges the validity of the term 'postmodern' and uses 'avant-garde' throughout her text in order to differentiate one strain of modernism from another. Her alternative tradition, which subsumes the postmodern category, is presented as the authentic tradition out of the 'avant-garde phase' of modernism, a tradition which exists in opposition to the orthodox establishment poetry characterised as the legacy of the New Critical version of modernism (3). After a long period in abeyance, she argues, this modernism re-emerged in the 1950s 'in somewhat diluted form' with, among others, Frank O'Hara, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and Allen Ginsberg – those poets who have been considered 'postmodern' – and has seen, since Language poetry, a full resurgence which represents the 'powerful avant-garde' who have, indeed, taken up the 'experimentation of the early twentieth century' (3; 5).

This is a potent reworking of the argument which posits the establishment form as the departure from authentic modernism, and therefore has the resistant anti-establishment mode of the avant-garde as modernism's real inheritance. This means that Stein is the ultimate originator of a literary modernism which has been at various points 'cut off' by one or another form of suppression: 'between the two world wars (and well beyond the second one) it almost seems as if poems and art works made a conscious effort to repress the technological and formal inventions of modernism at its origins' (3). This Freudian metaphor of repression, alongside the organic images of embryos and seeds Perloff deploys, shores up an argument that Bürger's historical avant-garde can make a return because, rather than failing in its revolutionary aims, as Bürger suggests, it has simply lain dormant, the 'unfulfilled promise of the revolutionary poetic impulse' (5). This solves some of the problems posed by Quartermain's argument because it enables a historically grounded account of the

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<sup>23</sup> It is interesting that a similar phrase is used by Craig Dworkin in his introduction to *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, p.xlv 'what passes for mainstream poetry'.

resurgence of the avant-garde which means that Perloff can reassert that category as deferred rather than dead. Rather than inventing a new term for this poetic, as Quartermain does, in order to avoid the complication of reviving the avant-garde which Bürger had insisted upon as a finished historical category, Perloff can thus propose a repressed originary avant-garde whose moments of recurrence can be historically accounted for.

I would also argue that, in Perloff's new configuration, the notion of tradition is reconstituted in a way which encompasses both Raymond Williams's call to seek out marginalised modernisms and the activity of recuperation represented in the Language poets' response to Stein. When Perloff says 'It is this particular legacy of early modernism that the new poetics has sought to recover', she seeks to resolve the problem of tradition as institutionalisation by drawing on those two methods (6). First, the new poetics consciously picks up a particular strand of modernism which, although perhaps presented as the authentically avant-garde strain, is not a way of eliding or usurping the establishment tradition in order to become the new mainstream. In this way, it keeps its marginal position whilst having as great a significance as the accepted tradition. Second, the act of seeking to 'recover' a lost legacy makes this an active formation of tradition rather than the passive reception of something handed down. The new poetics looks back to *find* a history for itself.

Perloff's argument takes a broad sweep of history which has the avant-garde suppressed early in the twentieth century. Read in this way, the lack of a development out of Stein's poetic, which Perloff categorises as avant-garde alongside the pre-war works of TS Eliot 'the American avant-gardist of 1910-11', the 'conceptual poetics' of Marcel Duchamp, and the work of *zaum* poet Velimir Khlebnikov, is situated historically as an event in line with a more generalised suppression of this early avant-garde 'phase' of modernism. Her claim for Eliot's early avant-gardism therefore takes on a synecdochical relation to the move her argument describes, in that his experiences of the war seem to lead him to 'repress' his earlier more radical poetry in order to produce the 'late 1920s' Eliot who has 'transformed himself into the self-proclaimed "classical" Anglo-Catholic, Royalist poet and the conservative critic and editor of the *Criterion* we know from the textbooks' (10-11).

What Perloff suggests here, therefore, is that, just as Eliot repressed his own avant-garde practices, so modernism as a whole repressed the radically experimental poetic of the pre-war period. What is significant about this argument for my discussion of Stein's place in the history of the avant-garde is the fact that Perloff isolates Stein as the poet who resists that repression. Indeed, Perloff sees the lack of recognition and development that Stein's poetic receives as a result of the broader cultural process of repression, implying that Stein's work in fact *exemplifies* that which is repressed. In this representation, Eliot is an agent of that repression, and Stein an agent of the resistance to it. Moreover, Khlebnikov, the other poet Perloff equates with the 'avant-garde' modernism, dies in 1922 and is thus removed from the scene at the point Perloff identifies roughly as the moment of institutionalisation, and in that sense he becomes irrelevant to the discussion of later developments. The proposal that Duchamp represents a resistance to this suppression of avant-garde *poetry* is also problematic. As a visual artist rather than a writer, Duchamp is widely regarded as an originator of the radicalism in visual art which, as Bernstein suggests, far from being repressed or suppressed, has developed in a clear line out of the experimentation of early modernism. This makes the suggestion that his work either suffered or resisted the kind of repression Perloff outlines difficult to sustain. What we are left with, then, is once again the argument that it is Stein alone who has continued the avant-garde line in poetry even in the face of its apparent historical elimination. This reasserts the claim that Stein is the exception, the only early modernist writer who maintains the avant-garde mode and who is therefore *the* authentic precursor for a contemporary avant-garde.

At first, Perloff clearly situates Stein's aesthetic in relation to the other cultural developments around her, challenging the prevailing view of 'the irreconcilable difference between Eliot and Stein', and suggesting that 'it may be more accurate to think of their aesthetic as two sides of the same coin'. This she names as 'the modernist aesthetic, shared by Eliot and Stein, even as it was shared by Pound and Joyce, and the other central figures of the period' (45). In Perloff's account, this aesthetic, following Eliot's formulation, has poetry as the 'escape from personality', sees the work as an end in itself, articulated as a 'demand for autonomy', and is interested in form rather than subject matter, being, as she puts it, 'disinterested' (47; 49; 50). She argues that Stein's work is also driven by the modernist commitment to

innovation, that ‘Pound’s “No good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years old” might have been Stein’s own credo’, and that she offered ‘a thoroughly modernist endorsement of genius theory’ (52; 53). Indeed, Perloff draws very direct parallels between Stein’s work and that of ‘the early Eliot’, offering a range of technical similarities and ending with the claim that ‘she shares Eliot’s Mallarmean conviction that the poet begins, not with ideas to be embodied in words, but with words themselves’ (74).

Whilst, however, Eliot came to represent – indeed, to usher in – the new hegemony, Stein remains ‘difficult’, characterised by ‘unreadability’ and included in the catalogue of avant-garde works not published in Eliot’s 1923 *Criterion*, which Perloff lists to indicate how conservative he had become: ‘no Dada, no Surrealism, no discussion of the visual arts, no Gertrude Stein or William Carlos Williams, no Picasso or Picabia’ (41). The historical trajectory of a repressed early avant-garde is also further muddled because, although Perloff focuses on two of Stein’s pre-war texts, ‘Miss Furr and Miss Skeene’ (1911) and *Tender Buttons* (1912), the discussion is very often supported by evidence from much later works, such as *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* (1933), ‘Poetry and Grammar’ (1935) ‘What are Masterpieces and Why are There so Few of Them’ (1936) and *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937). Thus, although Perloff grounds the argument in a broad historical conception of some changes in modernism in relation to historical events and cultural shifts, Stein once again appears to escape the history in which the avant-garde is repressed. Read like this, her oeuvre, as it does in Quartermain’s argument, again takes on the quality of a hermetically sealed, self-reflexive and self-determining entity. She remains, in the end, in the problematic position of the exception. In quoting Duchamp’s own comparison of himself and Stein: “‘I had no position. I’ve been a little like Gertrude Stein...there are people in every period who aren’t ‘in’””, Perloff attempts to draw attention, as Quartermain does, to her difference, reinforcing the claim that she is exceptional and making this a marker of Stein’s avant-garde status (77). I would argue, however, that the very notion that Duchamp occupied ‘no position’ is so patently untrue, as we shall clearly see in Chapter 2, that it more reasonably reveals the fact, as Bourdieu shows, that an artist or writer *must* occupy a position, and that such a position is determined in relation to the other positions taken on the field around them.



Because Perloff claims that their aesthetic had so much in common, however, she cannot resolve the relation of the dissolution of Eliot's 'avant-garde' period and the apparent maintenance of Stein's reputation as sustainedly avant-garde in terms of an argument about aesthetics. For Perloff, Stein's work shares the forms and techniques of her modernist peers, albeit with different emphases. Nor does Stein seem to challenge modernist ideas about the role and status of the poet and the work, because, in Perloff's view, she both endorses the notion of the creative genius and sees the text as an end in itself, the result of an autonomous creative act.<sup>24</sup> The nature of Perloff's 'authentic' avant-garde modernism whose legacy is picked up in the twenty-first century is thus not defined either by aesthetic choices or by aesthetic theories.

Perloff makes the ground for her distinction clear in this statement: 'The difference between Eliot and Stein can thus be understood as epistemological rather than aesthetic...Eliot – and this would also be true of Pound or Stevens – believes that words have a naming function, that they *mean* individually, whereas Stein believes that meaning is only conveyed by use, and hence by the larger context of the sentence' (56). This difference for Perloff is crucial, in that it correlates with the fundamental distinction in *mode*, similar to that put forward in Quartermain's argument, underpinned by the view that 'language, far from being a *vehicle* or conduit for thoughts and feelings outside and prior to it, is itself the site of meaning-making' (9). Although she imputes this quality to Eliot's early work, much of the chapter on him shows how and suggests why he moved away from this position to produce work which, in the case of 'Gerontion', has an 'emphasis on the need for *knowledge*' which 'marks an interesting departure from [his] early poetry' or, as in *The Waste Land*, ends with an 'appeal...to an outside source of authority' and 'deference to tradition' (37; 38). The implication here is that this later work seeks for meaning outside its own 'site of meaning-making', that is, outside the language in its use. In Perloff's argument, Stein's work, on the other hand, maintains an approach to language which deals in 'the play of signifiers rather than the pointing relation of signifier to signified' and 'allows for no distinction between something called "language" and something

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<sup>24</sup> The question of Stein's relation to modernist ideas about genius is examined in detail in Barbara Will's *Gertrude Stein, Modernism and the Problem of 'Genius'*.

called “thought”” (54; 55). It is this approach to language, therefore, that makes her avant-garde, just as it did the ‘early’ Eliot.

In this distinction between Stein and late Eliot, the suppression of the earlier ‘poetic breakthrough or rupture’ represented by Eliot’s later turn to authoritative sources of meaning or knowledge is therefore correlated to the act of turning away from a view of language as a site in which meaning is constructed to a view of language as a vehicle which simply transmits authoritative meanings or external ‘knowledge’. Perloff’s later assertion that ‘Stein’s composition cannot be paraphrased’ therefore sees Stein’s work as an exemplification of the view of language Eliot seems to reject. It presents Stein’s texts as showing the process of meaning-making in action and thus refusing to engage with authorised meanings or established forms of knowing. Significantly, it also indicates that Stein’s texts, in the nature of their composition, cannot themselves ever represent an authoritative or transferable example of meaning or knowledge. If their content cannot be paraphrased, then what they mean can never be detached and passed on in another form. Perloff adds a quotation taken from the *Tender Buttons* poem ‘Glazed Glitter’, to support this view: ““There is,” as she says herself a few sentences later, “no programme”” (69). In reading Stein’s commitment to this understanding of language as anti-authoritarian, Perloff directly correlates the resistance to interpretation or translation with the resistance to cultural assimilation – to institutionalisation. This has a strong parallel with the argument made both by the Language poets and by Quigley: that the resistance to cultural synthesis or institutionalisation is a factor *inherent* in Stein’s texts.

Perloff ends the chapter on Stein with an answer to her question: ‘How does this difference play itself out in the twenty-first century?’. The difference she refers to is the difference between Stein’s syntactical ‘language-game’ and Eliot’s tendency, after he has moved out of his avant-garde phase, to ‘poeticize specific topoi’. In a discussion of an excerpt from Darren Wershler-Henry’s 2000 text *the tapeworm foundry and/or the dangerous prevalence of imagination*, she identifies evidence of both influences, finding that, ‘Wershler-Henry’s prose...markedly recalls the locutions and rhythms of Steinian prose’ but that his ‘parodic “roadside glyphs” are primarily loaded and allusive nouns, more fully in the Eliot than in the Stein tradition’ (76). This dissolves the value of the difference between Stein and Eliot in a way

which makes it difficult to see what it is that makes Stein avant-garde and Eliot an example of the failure of the 'revolution' and the triumph of a conservative hegemony. Perloff's claims for Stein as avant-garde because of her 'differential syntax' in the end do seem to be reduced to a minor matter of aesthetic choice – just one example of what is available to the contemporary poet seeking avant-garde precursors. If the difference in fundamental views of language can be seen as just two equally meaningful strands from which the contemporary avant-garde can draw technical influence, then the 'avant-garde' strain of modernism is no more significant for them than the 'authorised' version.

These contradictions show us that if there is a meaningful difference between avant-garde modernism and the modernism of the New Critics, it must be defined historically as more than simply an epistemological view of language which can float free of that history. The clue lies perhaps in the way in which Perloff herself defines the later Eliot: in terms of his editorship of the *Criterion* a 'new journal' which 'gives little hint that there had been, on both sides of the Channel and in Dada New York, a vibrant utopian avant-garde' (41). I would argue that this offers a glimpse of the kind of contextual detail which can open up an understanding of the period and Stein's place in it. Such contextualisation, far from subsuming Stein into a hegemonic version of literary history, can help us to reframe that literary history around her in order to explore the relative functions of different modes of literary production not just in terms of technique and epistemology but in terms of their *position* and their *activity* on the cultural field.

As we have seen, Perloff's argument is more historically grounded than the approaches offered by the Language poets and by Quigley. It also presents a resolution to the problem of the postmodern position and enables a future for the avant-garde in its notion of deferral. The distinction drawn between late Eliot and Stein, however, returns us to some of the problems thrown up in those previous approaches. The historical origin that Stein provides is still defined by Perloff in a fundamentally abstract account of the processes which appear to be inherent in Stein's work, approaching it once again as a sealed autonomous entity and thus at the expense of a contextualised reading of each piece of work and its gestural functions and valences. This means that once again the text slips the anchors of the historical

location in which it made its meaning. Rather, it defines the avant-garde in terms of a set of techniques which, as I have argued, in the end returns us to the problem in Quartermain's argument of a perpetual avant-garde which seems to escape history. This way of reading Stein also contains the related problem that, as the authentic originator of the contemporary literary avant-garde, it makes of her an exceptional figure detached from the historical context in which and for which her work was produced and so does not engage with the historical specificity of her position in relation to the literary scene. The force of Perloff's argument is, therefore, as with Quartermain and Bernstein, compromised by the lack of a fully contextualised reading of the writer it claims as progenitor for a contemporary avant-garde.

### **High-modernist Stein: the original 'closed' text**

Perloff's reading of Stein's work as emphasising the 'materiality of the text' and presenting a 'large-scale indeterminacy' which makes it resistant to interpretation has engendered a debate amongst scholars and poets which has focused its attention solely on the question of the validity of different characterisations of Stein's oeuvre (6; 63). This debate has taken on an internal logic of its own which has once again moved the argument further away from the historical groundedness we began to see in Perloff's book. In response to Perloff's 'manifesto' for a twenty-first Century avant-garde modernist poetic, Jennifer Ashton's 2006 book *From Modernism to Postmodernism* contests the arguments which situate Stein as the precursor for experimental innovative poetry. Firstly, Ashton argues that Stein's aesthetic and epistemological concerns in fact mark her as belonging to a modernist genealogy which includes Eliot and those other 'high' modernists. Secondly she contends that, rather than repudiating what Bernstein, Williams, Quartermain and Perloff see as the New Critical 'establishment' version of modernism, the work of the Language poets 'derive[s] more from the New Critical "mainstream" ...than from the marginalized experimentation they claim to embrace'.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Ashton reinstates the category of the postmodern which Perloff's book seeks to dissolve, arguing that 'those differences, far from being merely apparent, are real' and that 'the modern/postmodern divide remains intact, both historically and theoretically' (2).

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<sup>25</sup> Jennifer Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, p.11. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

I would argue, however, that Ashton's claim to present a historical and theoretical argument is, perhaps even more than Perloff's, grounded in generalisations about the intrinsic nature of the poem rather than on the historical situation of its emergence or its immediate theoretical context. Moreover, Ashton also tends to see Stein's texts simply in terms of their relation to her oeuvre as a whole, once again envisioning Stein's work as a hermetically sealed corpus which refers only to itself. As set out in her introduction, Ashton's contention hinges on some fine distinctions between two categories she proposes: the modernist 'closed' text and the postmodern 'open' text. In her reading of *twenty-first-Century Modernism*, Ashton paraphrases Perloff's argument on these terms, claiming that for Perloff the reason that some modernist works can be claimed as precursors of the 'new' poetics is because they are open rather than closed. Ashton argues that this category of the 'open' text best describes Language poetry's participatory practice. This seems a meaningful description of those practices because, as we have seen in Bernstein and Andrews' introduction to *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, the Language poets seek to resist the commodification of language by 'repossessing the sign through close attention to, and active participation in, its production'. In relation to the arguments I have examined so far, the open text also has a parallel with Quartermain's 'disjunctive' poetic and, as Ashton suggests, with Perloff's characterisation of Stein's work as 'indeterminate' because it foregrounds language as the site of meaning-making. In Ashton's argument, these writers believe that the poetry exemplified by Stein's work and, for them, continued in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century experimental poets Perloff extols is 'open' because it interests itself in the process of signification rather than trying to signify something fixed and determinate.

After outlining the distinction between these two modes, however, Ashton goes on to use that distinction in order to dispute Perloff's claim for Stein as a precursor to the contemporary avant-garde modernism she hypothesises in *Twenty-First-Century Modernism*. Ashton quotes Stein's lecture 'What Are Masterpieces and Why Are There So Few of Them' in order to claim that Stein is in fact an adherent of the belief not in the open text of Language poetry but rather in the closed text of the high modernist 'autonomous lyric'. For Ashton, Stein is a high modernist because she is committed 'to the absolute autonomy of what [she] calls the work that "exists in and

of itself” (2). And it is this belief in the autonomy of the text which Ashton posits as the mark of the modernism she wants to distinguish from the post-modernism her argument seeks to reinstate. In her argument, Stein belongs to the high modernism of the autonomous closed text and Language poetry and its antecedents constitute a post-modern poetry which has developed out of the New Critical understanding of the poem as open. The two strands Ashton identifies thus diverge very differently when compared to the trajectory we have seen traced in Bernstein, Quartermain and Perloff – and, indeed, in Williams. For Ashton, the high modernist strand which, in their arguments, has led to that ‘tepid and unambitious Establishment poetry’, in fact emerges out of Stein’s elitist closed text, and the postmodern strand is the legacy of the New Criticism and culminates in Language poetry’s open text.

The argument Ashton forms is predicated upon the association she draws between the closed text and the autonomy of the text. Ashton interprets the open text as refusing autonomy and the closed text as autonomous, describing the latter relation as ‘a literature committed...to the irrelevance of the reader’ (2). In Ashton’s view, the work produced and valued by the Language poets, because it remains indeterminate, attains the status of the object and is, conversely, entirely dependent on the reader’s experience. In construing this distinction, Ashton can then claim that ‘the moment when the text becomes an object is precisely the moment when it can no longer be autonomous, since everything that constitutes the text’s objecthood – the “sound” and “feel” of its constitutive syllables – belongs entirely to the experience of someone’ (10). The open text of Language poetry cannot therefore be autonomous. In Ashton’s version of autonomy, which she attributes to Stein, the text is sufficient to itself and independent of either reader or writer. The open text, the text as object, on the other hand, is entirely dependent on each reader’s interaction. Quoting I.A. Richards’s 1926 *Science and Poetry*, as a representation of the ‘critical principle behind’ Cleanth Brooks’s later position in the *Well-Wrought Urn* (1946), she goes on to argue that the New Critical insistence that the text cannot be interpreted, but can only be ‘experienced’ is tantamount to the same position. She argues that the ‘New Critical imperative’ is very much like the imperative expressed in Language poetry’s insistence on the ‘materiality’ or ‘objecthood’ of the text, that ‘in order for us to have the experience of its objecthood, the poem “must not mean but be,” or, to use Richards’s words: “it is never what a poem *says* that matters but what it *is*”’.

Developing her argument from this congruence between the New Critical and Language poetry view of the relation between text and reader, Ashton argues that 'The New Critical poem becomes, in other words, the very kind of literalist text that Perloff says foregrounds the material form of language and impels our participation in its construction' (10).

Looking at the attitudes to autonomy in the arguments which see Stein as the precursor for Language poetry, however, reveals a more complicated picture than the simple identification of the closed text with the autonomous text upon which Ashton's contention largely rests. The relation between objecthood and autonomy is explicitly dealt with in a rather different way by Quartermain in the introduction to *Disjunctive Poetics*. He conceptualises the disjunctiveness of the texts he valorises as the function which engenders their autonomy, claiming that 'to call a poem an object is not to see it in the traditional art sense of "masterpiece": aloof, irreproachable, transcendent, separate from our lives, but to see it as an autonomous object, an identifiable thing that we can look at out there in the world, and respond to' (2). This argument offers a form of autonomy in which the poem is always 'there' and never subsumed or synthesised by the culture it inhabits, seen instead as a resistant object which, as we have seen, stands out starkly against that culture because it represents that 'poetic fact' which is distinct from the 'historical (or economic or whatever) fact' (16). As I suggested earlier, the position conferred by Quartermain on the disjunctive text-as-object does indeed echo I.A. Richards, but, in direct contrast to Ashton's view, this is because it *does* confer the status of autonomy on the poem. What the arguments offered by Quartermain and indeed by Perloff propose is that the avant-garde text is autonomous not because it has a 'closed' meaning which is utterly determined and authoritative, but, conversely, because its meaning cannot be fixed. It remains resistant because every reading is different and inconclusive, which means the text is never assimilated. In this argument, the avant-garde work is the work which continues, over time, to be experimental and challenging, just as the Language poets' incomplete, precarious readings of Stein's *Tender Buttons* poems suggest. It is therefore autonomous because it can never be fully claimed by any reading: it remains 'open' precisely because it cannot be finally interpreted.

Indeed, the critique of New Criticism does not depend upon a critique of the notion of autonomy. Both Quartermain and Perloff claim autonomy as a function of Stein's poetic, and as an important strand in their argument for a recurrent or deferred avant-garde. This argument, rather than taking issue with autonomy as such, turns on the relation of the text to the institutions which determine attitudes to language and its use, drawing a distinction between those that do and those that do not depend for their meaning upon the received ideas and authoritative forms of knowing which stand outside the text, and on the related distinction between those texts which can and those that cannot in themselves become authoritative. The 'open' text therefore becomes the text which perpetually demands new readings but which is never finally read, the text which escapes institutionalisation to stand in a permanently resistant and therefore autonomous relation to authoritative forms of knowledge and meaning-making.

For Ashton, however, Stein cannot be invested in the idea that the meaning of the text is a result of the reader's participation because she believes in the autonomous closed text which does not require the recognition of the reader but rather exists in and of itself. Therefore, Stein is modernist because of her commitment to the notion of autonomy and, moreover, in Ashton's argument this distinguishes her from the New Critics who are, in fact, *postmodern* because they imagine meaning as 'a function of the experiential effects of the poem' (27). This use of the notion of autonomy means that Ashton can claim that the 'avant-garde credentials of Perloff's twenty-first-century modernists derive more from the New Critical "mainstream" they claim to repudiate than from the marginalized experimentation they claim to embrace' (11). For Ashton, therefore, 'the legacy of the New Criticism is not modernism's "autonomous lyric" but postmodernism's "open text"', and Stein is modernist rather than postmodern because she denies the relevance of the reader's response and 'locates the value of art in its autonomy (with respect to anyone's experience of it), and in its autonomy, the determinacy of its meaning' (27; 28).

Read as a trajectory for a literary history, Ashton's argument has the schism identified by Bernstein, Quartermain and Perloff occurring between the closed autonomous texts of the pre-New Critical modernism of Gertrude Stein (and Laura Riding) and the nascent post-modernism represented by the New Critical rejection of authorial



intention which enables the open text to exist. The notion of autonomy, however, remains crucially unexamined in this conclusion. Ashton claims that the 'hallmark of the New Criticism' is 'its commitment to the autonomy of the poem' and that this represents 'its modernism' whilst simultaneously claiming that its rejection of authorial intention and therefore its emphasis on the 'experiential effects' of the poem makes it the progenitor of postmodernism (27). This contradicts both her earlier argument that a poem could not be simultaneously open to interpretation and autonomous, and her view that because Stein is committed to autonomy she is committed to the determinacy of meaning and not to the open text.

The different emphases placed on the notion of autonomy by Ashton, and by Perloff and Quintermain have enabled them to sustain very different standpoints on Stein's work which have led them to radically different conclusions. Quintermain has autonomy as the independence of the text created by its permanent resistance to authorised meanings and practices of meaning-making. The autonomous work he describes forms a perpetually disjunctive and resurgent poetic which stands outside the hegemonic cultural constructs of its era and therefore outside history. Perloff's autonomy is 'the rejection of instrumental value' which she sees as 'a cornerstone of modernism', and this autonomy, read as the indeterminacy of meaning in Stein's writing, signifies her adherence to modernism's original impulse (50). This can without much effort be read as a version of the Language poets' resistance to the commodification of language and is an aspect of Perloff's argument that modernism has continued into the twenty-first century in that form. In that sense therefore this autonomy is also a challenge to the capitalist culture which has instrumentalisation as one of its cornerstones. Perloff thus reads Stein's work as representing a mode, much like Quintermain's, of resistance to hegemony. Ashton's reading of Stein's work as striving for a 'mathematical independence from experience as such', on the other hand, proposes the autonomy of a self-generating hermetic universe utterly divorced from either the reader's response or the context in which the work is produced and thus, conversely, corresponds to Bürger's 'institutionalisation' of art (28).

Despite their opposing conclusions, all of these readings sustain the notion that Stein's commitment to autonomy means her work can stand outside its historical moment. On Quintermain's terms, this is because it has refused assimilation and

remains perpetually and meaningfully disjunctive. For Perloff, it offers a model of resistance to the instrumentalisation of language which means it has in an exceptional way also remained resistant to the hegemony represented by institutionalised modernism. Finally, as Ashton would have it, Stein sees her work as existing in an elitist metaphysical space beyond human life, determined for and by itself and existing only on its own terms.

### **Autonomous Stein: ‘What Are Master-pieces and Why Are There so Few of Them’**

Ashton’s argument, and indeed those with which she engages, rests on the belief in a resolution which will draw final distinctions between a set of apparent absolutes in apparently binary oppositions. In the discussion of the difference between the open and closed text, the engaged poem and the autonomous poem, the indeterminacy versus the determinacy of language, the dualisms take on a life of their own which moves the discussion into an abstract realm far removed from what constitutes the work in its own history. The very convolutions, contradictions and infra-thin differences which emerge in this debate point to the ultimately reductive nature of an approach which attempts to work out a history of twentieth century literary production on purely abstract and theoretical terms.

Ashton’s introductory argument about Stein’s views on autonomy centres on her reading of Stein’s 1936 lecture ‘What Are Master-pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them’, which is also discussed by Perloff in order to support her claim that Stein’s aesthetic has important parallels with the aesthetic of prominent modernist writers. Ashton uses the lecture to show that Stein believes ‘a masterpiece can never be an “open text” because it can never “invite participation,”’ that the ‘responses and experiences’ of readers ‘have nothing to do with what makes it art’ and that this is therefore ‘nothing if not a commitment to the autonomy of the text’ (9). Perloff discusses this text in order to place Stein in the context of the other modernist writers around her by using it to exemplify her belief that ‘Art is by definition not earning anything, which is to say, *disinterested*’, a view which has characterised modernism ‘from Baudelaire and Mallarme to Pound and Joyce’ (50). These readings coincide in seeing Stein’s position as defender of the autonomous text, but whereas for Perloff

this is an aspect of modernism's theoretical approach, a way of situating Stein in her period, for Ashton it is the ground upon which the very category of modernism is defined. As she says of New Criticism's commitment to autonomy: 'this would be its modernism' (27).

The way Stein is situated in these readings leads to a problematic methodology in which her work is treated, as we have seen, as if it is a sealed and autonomous self-reflexive entity. I would argue, however, that, in Stein's discussion of what is read here as autonomy in 'What are Master-pieces', the relation between the text, the author, the reader and the cultural context in which the work is produced, rather than being rejected or elided, are dealt with very directly as important problems. I would suggest that whilst ostensibly reflecting a desire for the autonomous closed text, Stein's lecture in fact represents the recognition that such a thing is literally impossible, and, moreover, that this impossibility is precisely the situation with which the 'modern' writer in particular engages.

In this lecture, Stein, in working out what seems like a closed circuit, 'the relation of the act of creation to the subject the creator uses to create that thing', does apparently describe a sealing off of the work from those aspects external to it.<sup>26</sup> Towards the end of the lecture, Stein argues that 'time and identity is what you tell about as you create only while you create they do not exist. That is really what it is' (361). Thus, creation is the act of taking a special position somehow beyond the consciously inhabited world of phenomena in order to be able to tell a story of that world. This does indeed seem to reflect a belief that the act of *creation* requires a detached or disinterested standpoint, but the arguments about Stein's autonomy see the finished *work* itself as also occupying that position. The question of the status of the artwork itself, however, is not so clearly resolved in 'What Are Master-pieces'. The readings of this lecture tend to focus on its very abstract theoretical moments, but Stein's overt references to specific contexts of production and reception shed a different light on her discussion of the relation of the work to its subject matter and, moreover, reveal in important ways her own relation to this context.

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<sup>26</sup> Gertrude Stein, 'What Are Master-pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them', in *Gertrude Stein: Writings 1932-1946* ed. by Catharine R Stimpson and Harriet Chessman (New York: Library of America, 1998), pp.353-363 (p.356). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Her opening premise that ‘there is something about what has been written having been printed which makes it no longer the property of the one who wrote it’ is a prominently placed and explicit engagement with the processes of cultural production. Stein makes a crucial distinction between writing and printing which recognises that once a work is in the public domain, it no longer belongs to the writer because it becomes a component of the culture which produces it as a printed text. The text once printed enters the sphere of public culture and becomes a cultural artefact. Stein seems to regret the passage of the work into the cultural sphere, however, explaining that she had originally decided not to read something prepared for fear of it being subsequently printed. Her opening remark, ‘I was almost going to talk this lecture’ because ‘all the lectures I have written and read in America have been printed’ does indeed appear to express a desire to keep her work out of the public realm (355).

This is complicated, perhaps even contradicted, however, when Stein tells her audience that she has chosen nonetheless to write the lecture beforehand rather than relying on extemporisation. She explains ‘I was going to talk to you but actually it is impossible to talk about master-pieces and what they are because talking essentially has nothing to do with creation’ (355). For Stein, talking has nothing to do with creation because talking enacts what she categorises as the ‘identity’ of the speaker whereas creative writing – which she also later opposes to letter writing – enacts what Stein calls ‘entity’. Thus, the work cannot be an act of creation unless it is written – she felt she had to write the lecture in order to engage with the idea of creation – and it also has to be written not for one identified individual, as a letter is, but for an audience who are not known to the writer. In arguing that neither an act of speech nor a letter are anything to do with ‘entity’, Stein implies that any expression which is addressed to a known and specific audience cannot be a creation.

I would argue that, far from exemplifying a detachment from the contexts of its production and reception, Stein’s discussion of her theory of creation indicates that the status the publication of the work affords it is closer to the notion of ‘entity’ she outlines in the course of the lecture than her reluctance suggests. If talking and letter writing have nothing to do with creation, then what does have to do with creation is

the writing of a work for an unspecified audience. Indeed, Stein has to write the lecture and risk it being printed in order for it to have any relation to the creative act of entity at all. Seen on these terms, the act of creation carried out from the position of 'entity' rather than the position of 'identity' is essentially the act of *authorship* – one would write a letter rather than author it – and, for Stein, the more detached from the identity of the writer that authorship is, the more likely it is that a masterpiece is being written.

In Stein's argument, the work produced by 'entity', the real creative force, is detached from its creator and has an audience beyond the individual reach and experience of that creator. If the printed text is the mode which must be deployed in order to engage with creativity because 'talking essentially has nothing to do with creation', then the work of 'entity' is not meaningful as a personal engagement, it is meaningful as the product of an author. The artefact which is the result of creation is therefore the work which is no longer a private or intimate affair: it is the work which is released into public culture. I would argue that the notion of entity has everything to do with the release of the work into the public sphere, and that the act of relinquishing identity it entails is the act of authorship. Authorship is not an act of individual expression, but its opposite: the authored work is the work which is read, and the author designates not the individual who writes it, but the existence of their name and their work in the field of literary production. In my interpretation, the work of entity only exists as a component of this field and as such is divorced from the identity of the creating subject. And, yet, Stein explicitly regrets the passage of her work into the cultural field. The ambivalence with which the lecture opens – that she wanted not to write the lecture in case it was printed but she had to, otherwise it could not engage with the idea of creation – reflects a preoccupation with the cultural status of the work which is the significant sub-plot of the lecture's insistence on its metaphysical distance.

Stein's reluctance about the entry of her writing into the public sphere is paralleled in her regret about the reception of the work. In the final paragraphs of the lecture Stein offers this observation:

When you are writing before there is an audience anything written is as important as any other thing and you cherish anything and everything that you have written. After the audience begins, naturally

they create something that is they create you, and so not everything is so important, something is more important than another thing, which was not true when you were you that is when you were not you as your little dog knows you (365).

What Stein expresses here is an unease about the way in which, when it comes into contact with an audience, the text and its 'author' are defined by that contact. This is an anxiety about the way the work changes its meaning as a result, and a concern about the imposition of value judgements on the work that this engenders. What this shows us is that, rather than imagining the work can really exist permanently and perfectly in a separate sphere, Stein is profoundly conscious that the text, on entering the public domain, is inevitably changed by it. This is therefore not a dismissal of the relevance of the reader and the cultural context the text must inhabit if it is to be read, but, on the contrary, an acute awareness of their importance.

Moreover, in her claim that 'the detective story which is you might say the only really modern novel form that has come into existence gets rid of human nature by having the man dead to begin with the hero is dead to begin with and so you have so to speak got rid of the event before the book begins', Stein chooses as her example of the potential masterpiece a popular form hardly associated with either high-modernist or disjunctive autonomy (358). For Stein the detective novel is 'the only really modern novel form' because, like the masterpiece, it does not concern itself with human nature or identity and presumably therefore draws its impulse from the entity of the creative masterpiece. The detective novel, however, a popular form produced on a large scale would seem, in its mass production and its engagement with a huge audience, to epitomise everything Stein fears in her anxieties about her work being printed by a publisher and read by an audience. This once again serves to show that the anxiety Stein articulates is the conscious expression of an understanding that the 'really modern' literary text is formed in its interaction with its cultural context.

Further, in discussing the actual creative output of her period, rather than sustaining the view that the text is created in a vacuum beyond its time, Stein draws the attention of her audience to the very specific historical realities which shape the cultural production of her day. This is clear in the following passage:

You can tell that so well in the difficulty of writing novels or poetry these days. The tradition has always been that you may more or less describe the things that happen you imagine them of course but you more or less describe the things that happen but nowadays everybody all day long knows what is happening and so what is happening is not really interesting, one knows it by radios cinemas newspapers biographies autobiographies until what is happening does not really thrill any one (357).

Stein points out that technological advances of the first third of the twentieth century – the broad availability of radio and cinema, the acceleration of printing processes and the development of distribution methods – have enabled, indeed, have generated, the mass production of information. Because of this, the literary work must do something other than ‘describe the things that happen’. The task of the writer is therefore made more ‘difficult’ as a direct result of historical conditions. Thus, what Stein seeks to identify here, namely the ‘relation of the act of creation to the subject that creator uses to create that thing’ is to a significant extent determined by those conditions. As she says ‘this has something to do with master-pieces and why there are so few of them but not everything’. In suggesting that the task of the writer in her age is no longer, as it had been in ‘the tradition’, to ‘describe’, or rather, to *represent* the subject matter (what she calls earlier, the ‘things you see and...human beings and animal beings’), she identifies a specific way in which the relation between subject matter and creation is altered directly by these historical changes. In this part of the lecture, therefore, the defining feature of the creative act is the direct response to its moment, and this is defined by material changes and the changes in the collective perception of the role of art they engender.

These apparent contradictions in Stein’s lecture reflect a highly significant feature of the new kinds of cultural production which had emerged in her era: the emphasis is not simply on the act of making the work, but also, and crucially, it is on the creation and control of the contexts which determine the way in which that work is engaged with. Stein’s ambivalence signals a fundamental preoccupation with the relations between author, text, reader and the context in which the text is produced and received. And this preoccupation constitutes a defining aspect of the artistic and literary output in the period in which Stein worked. Indeed, the pressure Stein’s work and activity put on the concepts of the literary work, the author and the reader are crucial in an examination of her work, her period and their legacy, and in particular in working through the relative status of those terms – avant-garde, modernist,

postmodern – upon which a literary genealogy for contemporary poetry might be predicated.

Marginalisation and canonisation are historical processes which have to do with much more than those internal debates about the nature of the writing in and of itself. In suggesting that the relative position of the work is determined purely by the work itself – is inherent to the work – Ashton takes the same route as Quartermain, Perloff and the Language poets. The relative position of the literary work is determined by a range of other factors – and they are particular to its time and change over time. In reading Stein's texts out of context, all of these approaches presuppose the autonomy of the work before they begin. Their methodologies are therefore ultimately reductive. This is a conversation about the status of Stein's writing which takes the abstract theoretical discussion of the work and its internal modes and functions as a way of ascertaining its place in the cultural phenomenon we now call 'modernism'. Even if it is a negative relation – that Stein's work is not like what became 'mainstream' modernism, that it is more like contemporary innovative poetry – this question cannot be resolved by arguments which limit their attention to the work alone. In wrenching it from its context, the activity of removing it from its relations to modernist culture has already been achieved.

Thus, the problem with the positing of either an autonomous avant-garde or an autonomous high-modernist lyric as the basis for a literary history is revealed in the ways in which these concepts are simultaneously predicated on and construct a Stein who is outside history. This reading of Stein as hermetic and arcane precludes an examination of her texts in their context which would be the appropriate method for understanding the relation of 'Stein', the work, the author and the persona, with the institutions and the institutionalising forces about which these arguments turn. Stein's work is, as it must be, a response to a complex context, and I would argue that it is the kind of response it represents that, in fact, those late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century poets admire. It makes no sense, therefore, to read Stein's work only in terms of itself and its relations to her corpus. As Bourdieu tells us, the field of cultural production is '*a space of literary or artistic position-takings*', and if the literary work is produced in a space of position-takings, context means everything. It is therefore to the modernist field and Stein's positions in it that we now turn.



## Chapter 2

### Early Modernist Persona

After all we are all modern.<sup>1</sup>

– Gertrude Stein in a letter to Mabel Dodge, 1913

#### Public or private?

In this chapter I return to the early twentieth century in order to probe the arguments, discussed in Chapter 1, which see Stein as an exceptional figure in the history of literary modernism and which form the basis for the methodology which reads her work as a discrete and self-reflexive entity. In asking what position Stein and her work occupy in the literary and artistic scene of the 1900s and 1910s, I also want to put pressure on the related model of two parallel streams of literary history which underpins the claims for an avant-garde heritage. The history which the alternative strand wants to counter works Stein into modernism as a collector and as an interesting figure on the Paris art scene of the early twentieth Century. This is the public persona of the salon popularised after the 1930s success of *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* as exemplified by Ulla Dydo's critique in *A Stein Reader*. The alternative history has its roots in what is seen as Stein's more radical work, the 1912 Stein of *Tender Buttons* taken up by the Language poets, and traces an avant-garde genealogy from the Stein of Perloff's 'experimentation of the early twentieth century'. This is the authentic Stein, the difficult early innovator, rejecting and rejected by the institutions which sanction artistic production and therefore never assimilated into literary history. The way in which I want to complicate this model is not in offering any real challenge to the fact of the sanctioned version of literary history: it has already been written, and it is inarguable that Stein's work was left out of the New Critical canon. What I do want to confront, however, is the alternative narrative which

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<sup>1</sup> Gertrude Stein in a letter to Mabel Dodge, c. February 1913, in Patricia Everett, *A History of Having a Great Many Times Not Continued To Be Friends: the Correspondence Between Mabel Dodge and Gertrude Stein, 1911-1934* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), p.174.

sustains the view that the ‘experimental’ Stein occupied a marginal position from which she originated a poetic divorced from its historical moment.

The arguments which accompany the important work of recuperating those of Stein’s texts which have fallen out of print, have only been published in little magazines, or have never been printed, tend to use this distinction between the experimental Stein and the popular icon to claim the greater authenticity or integrity of those pieces. In the introduction to the 1993 *A Stein Reader*, Dydo offers *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* (1933) *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1936), and the book *Picasso* (1938) as examples of what she calls those ‘late public works’. The other side of this reading of Stein’s value is the notion that the early ‘innovative’ works included in *A Stein Reader* such as the portraits ‘Matisse’, (1909), ‘Orta, or One Dancing’, (1911-12) and the longer text ‘Miss Furr and Miss Skeene’ (1911) (which Marjorie Perloff also reads as the prime example of her ‘differential syntax’) are ‘private’ experiments which do not engage with what Dydo calls the “‘outside’” world of the ‘personality’. When Dydo claims she wants her collection to focus on ‘the years before she achieved popular success with *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*’, she consolidates the picture of the late Stein, the writer of the *Autobiography*, as the exemplar of the popular author-figure assimilated by the market.<sup>2</sup>

The alternative literary history is therefore predicated on the division of ‘Stein’ into two separate entities. Of these entities, the accessible public persona belongs, in however a diminished form, within ‘institutionalized’ modernism, whereas for the Language poets, for Quartermain and for Perloff, the work of the early private radical by its very nature resists all institutional frameworks. This view of Stein runs parallel with the belief that her ‘innovative’ work sustains the avant-garde line precisely because it is inherently resistant to all institutions. The institutions at stake in the positing of this distinction are, first, the institution ‘modernism’, into which the late Stein persona is integrated, and, second, the institution of the market, which is bound up with her role as art collector and salon host and with the construction of that persona as an act of commodification. The arguments which have her practice as the origin of a distinct line claim an early-twentieth-century exceptional Stein who resists both the institution ‘modernism’ and the institution of the market. In this chapter, I

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<sup>2</sup> Ulla Dydo, *A Stein Reader*, p.5.

want to position Stein firmly in her time as a writer who must be seen much more consistently as an active participant in a cultural milieu and whose work engages directly with a whole cultural apparatus. To use Stein's own terms, this chapter looks at the ways in which, rather than writing for a time outside her time, 'the progress of [her] conceptions' are 'the natural progress entirely in accordance with [her] epoch'.<sup>3</sup>

I would argue that the significance of Stein's work in the 1900s and 1910s was not only in the internal workings of its experimental form and mode: it was also derived from her activity on the scene of what was already being called 'modernism' and from the status this conferred on her texts as the products of a recognisable persona. This complicates both the notion that Stein's work can be divorced from its context as something special and distinct, and the idea that Stein's work is entirely resistant to either the abstract logic or the material manifestation of commodity culture. The construction of a persona, as well as signifying her 'modernist' credibility, is a part of Stein's complex and ambivalent engagement with the institution of the market. This chapter explores the complexities of Stein's relationship to 'modernism' and to the market by examining a number of examples from what, in this early period, became her emblematic genre: the 'portraits' of the 1900s and 1910s. In exploring this dynamic, I will also draw out the ways in which Stein engages with those related and significant factors which are still very much her concern when she writes 'What Are Masterpieces and Why Are There So Few of Them': authorship, audience and twentieth Century print culture.

An important strand of my discussion is that the arguments which posit an early authentic Stein impelled only by private integrity are also problematic because they do not take account of one of the significant and explicit functions of Stein's work: to narrate her own period. The notion of the arcane private experiment of 'early' Stein versus her accessible popular accounts of the story of modernism in late works such as *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* is problematized when we take into account how much Stein is telling the story of her era throughout her career. The early works are depictions of their moments, and in rendering those scenes, the portraits in particular also map those networks of affiliation in which Stein explicitly embeds

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<sup>3</sup> Gertrude Stein, 'Composition as Explanation', in *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. by Joan Retallack, pp.215-225 (p.222).

herself. The arguments for her resistant poetic often uncouple her from these scenes and find the sources of her work in a private, intimate world, and in doing so, rather than salvaging her as an important writer for her time, they effectively write Stein out of modernism. I would argue that, on the contrary, Stein is always explicitly *there*, writing a historiography, mapping her field, and that her ‘experimental’ early work does this as much as her ‘popular’ late work.

The texts under consideration in this chapter are the portraits ‘Matisse’ and ‘Picasso’, published together in 1912, the 1913 ‘Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia’, and ‘M. Vollard and Cezanne’, published in 1915. I would argue that all of Stein’s texts, whether early or late, whether considered ‘experimental’ or ‘accessible’, engage in ambitious attempts to intervene in their cultural moment, participating in the project to create an audience for new kinds of literary and artistic production. Rather than producing her experimental texts outside the broader cultural scene and its associated institutions, Stein’s attention to the game of position-taking on the cultural field is a significant aspect of her work, something that is particularly evident in these portraits and their publication contexts. This is important because it is an essential feature of the whole period, perhaps even a defining feature, whether ‘emerging’ ‘early’ or ‘late’, that many writers and artists are engaged not just in developing and promoting their practice, but in attempts to affect the cultural field as such. Bourdieu provides a meaningful framework for clarifying the forces on the field and their interactions, but I would go further and say that much of the activity in this period attempts to both disclose and actively influence the field of cultural production itself. Thus, these texts can be understood historically as efforts at transformation not just on the field but also of the field, reframing the roles and functions of text, author, reader and the institutions which mediate them. The chapter will show how, in remaking artists, audiences and modes of engagement, Stein’s work endeavours, like much of the literary and artistic production of her time, to make new positions available.

### **Group identities**

Rather than operating as a separate individual or representing an anomaly, Stein was embedded in both the European and American cultural scenes because she worked together with other writers and artists as a member of a series of interconnecting groups. Indeed, Stein is not characterised in early-twentieth-century representations as

singular or exceptional figure, but rather as a member of a group and an actor on a scene. As Karen Leick tells us ‘Stein’s unusual writing was understood in the context of the much publicised work of Picasso, Matisse, Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, and others’.<sup>4</sup> Stein’s identity as part of a defined group is explicitly signified by Stein herself in her portraits, notably those of Picasso and Matisse, which were published together in 1912 in the photographer and gallery owner Alfred Stieglitz’s American journal *Camera Work*. The portraits, as well as emphasising the importance of the group, also problematize ideas of authorship, patronage and audience in significant ways. These aspects of Stein’s writing and activity are explicitly presented as a new kind of practice alongside and identified with a whole series of other practices which defined themselves as ‘modern’.

Michael Levenson says in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*: ‘The will to live out the risks of technical experiment ... was characteristically nourished within small groups of mutually confirming artists...the circles forming around Stein, Woolf, Pound...were as much the condition of what we call Modernism as any set of formal gestures’.<sup>5</sup> Group culture is a defining feature of the European artistic and literary scene in the 1900s and 1910s. In some examples, notably Futurism, the group is clearly defined, its members named and its theories published in manifesto form. There are many other configurations represented in this period, however, and over the last two decades scholarship has emphasised the variety in the nature and composition of groups.<sup>6</sup> The complex of claims for theories, counter-theories and anti-theories in the struggle to form new bases for artistic production is a significant feature at this point, and it has already, by 1912 when Stein’s portraits of Matisse and Picasso are published, generated a fluorescence of

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<sup>4</sup> Leick, *Gertrude Stein and the Making of an American Celebrity*, p. 24

<sup>5</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. by Michael Levenson, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.5.

<sup>6</sup> The introduction to *Modernist Group Dynamics: The Politics and Poetics of Friendship*, for example, puts it thus: ‘For decades, the study of literary and philosophical modernism concerned solitary figures like the flâneur, the exile, and the lonely genius, but recently the group formations that fostered modernist movements have emerged into view. Scholars now recognise how much of modernism took shape in letters and personal encounters, and how collaborative ventures like the salon and the “little magazine” contributed, not incidentally but centrally, to the cultural innovations of the early twentieth century’. *Modernist Group Dynamics: The Politics and Poetics of Friendship*, ed. by Fabio A Durão and Dominic Williams (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), p.vii.

multiple, conflicting, yet often entangled group positions.<sup>7</sup> The proliferation of groups as a characteristic of the 1900s and 1910s is explicitly recognised at the time and this reflects another significant aspect of these configurations. As Wulfman and Scholes point out in their discussion of the magazines which played such a significant role in the development of modernist groups, ‘modernism was a self-conscious movement’.<sup>8</sup> This self-consciousness is clearly an attribute of declamatory manifesto-led movements like Futurism and Vorticism, but this letter from the American painter Marsden Hartley to Alfred Stieglitz in 1912, the year Stieglitz publishes Stein’s portraits, suggests it is also true of other modernist assemblages:

Here one finds more cliques and groups than could be imagined – and such groups for instance as the Fergusson-Estelle Rice group which exploits itself in *Rhythm*. In one of the last numbers of *Rhythm* is a treatise on Gauguin’s influence in which Kandinsky is talked of among others. He is evidently one of Gauguin’s pupils and is I believe a modern light in Berlin and Munich. He has lately brought out a new magazine called *Der Blaue Reiter* which I shall look up – very likely they talk of modernism – and God knows they talk much about everything here.<sup>9</sup>

Visiting Paris from America for the first time, Hartley, like many other American artists interested in developments in the European art world, crossed the Atlantic in order to absorb its influences and develop his own work. During his stay he became friendly with Stein, to whom he had been introduced by Stieglitz, often visiting her at 24 Rue de Fleurus, and his comments here help to contextualise Stein’s literary production in this period. As this letter to Stieglitz recognises, the new art at this point is characterised by the variety of ‘cliques and groups’ which appear to gather around the signifier ‘modernism’. Moreover, Hartley is also clearly aware of the networks created in the intersection of those groups, noting that the association of the British periodical *Rhythm* with Kandinsky leads him to the German Expressionist *Blaue Reiter* group and their magazine. Hartley’s presentation of the transnational modernist scene in 1912, from his position as relative outsider, reveals the contemporary consciousness of the category of ‘modernism’ as a distinct phenomenon which is

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<sup>7</sup> Lawrence Rainey, for example, traces the positions and counter positions in the responses to the programmatic approach of Futurism, calling Imagism ‘the first anti-avant garde’ and a ‘movement to end movements’ because it defines itself, in opposition to Futurism’s dogma, as a group without a programme. See Rainey p.30.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman, *Modernism in the Magazines: An Introduction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p74.

<sup>9</sup> Marsden Hartley on Paris, in a letter to Alfred Stieglitz, July 1912, in *My Dear Stieglitz: Letters of Marsden Hartley and Alfred Stieglitz 1912-1915*, ed. by J.T. Voorhies (Columbia: South Carolina Press, 2002), p.19.

paradoxically defined by the plurality of the groups which engage with it. Hartley's response reveals both the excitement and frustration which this condition generates, and reflects the tension between flux and stability which is reflected in its many configurations. Hartley's presentation of 'more cliques and groups than could be imagined' evokes a sense of spectacle. It is a noisy, diverse scene of intersecting forces and forms, and one which, as suggested by all the 'talk of modernism', is indeed self-conscious.

In this context, and like other writers in this period, Stein recognises the necessity of signalling her alliances in order to mark her position amongst a group of names and thus promote her own name. Rather than being, or indeed defining herself, as a distinctive, discrete figure, it is her identity as part of a group of the kind Marsden Hartley's letter documents which gives her work meaning in this moment and beyond. It is significant therefore that Stein's engagement in this early period in which modernism, as it were, first consciously recognises itself is marked by her production of a series of portraits. Rather than representing the 'private' Stein characterised in arguments for her early exceptionalism, they are public, and publicised, expressions of allegiance which make a claim for her modernist persona bound to a notion of group identity.

The desire for a meaningful group identity is strongly linked to the desire for a new persona beyond existing categories and it accompanies both Stein's move to Europe in 1904 and her move away from traditional literary forms in *The Making of Americans*. This is exemplified in a striking passage from the opening section of the novel, a text which both performs and tracks the transformation of her work to an experimental writing practice:

Brother singulars, we are misplaced in a generation that knows not Joseph. We flee before the disapproval of our cousins, the courageous condescension of our friends who gallantly sometimes agree to walk the streets with us, from all them who never in any way can understand why such ways and not the others are dear to us, we fly to the kindly comfort of an older world accustomed to take all manner of strange forms into its bosom.<sup>10</sup>

This passage is from the section of the novel written in 1903 in the midst of a series of journeys between America and Europe, and it reflects the impulse which led to Stein's

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<sup>10</sup> Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), p.21.

decision to move to Europe permanently in June 1904. It is an urgent act of self-identification and reflects a keen sense of the necessity for the group as a context in which such 'singular' practice can be enabled. The narrative at this point has moved abruptly from a third-person contemplative digression on the notion of 'vital singularity' to a direct address to the reader. The rhetorical foregrounding of the interpellation 'Brother singulars' ascribes such a singularity to the reader as well, who is thus identified as a type who presents a 'danger' to the 'bourgeois mind' which has only 'a little of the fervour for diversity' and can only countenance 'a strain of singularity that yet keeps within the limits of conventional respectability'. The reader is therefore unconventional, dangerous and 'queer', and is claimed in brotherhood with Stein.

This insistence on a particular kind of engagement – essentially, of identification with the narrator – is also an insistence that Stein's work requires not just a kind of reading, but also a kind of reader. In the emphasis on diversity and in the ostensibly paradoxical notion of the 'brother singular', Stein proposes a confederacy which is defined by difference. As opposed to the 'cousins' and 'friends' of ordinary social intercourse, the alliance of those who do not conform is a brotherhood, a notion which indicates a monastic order or secret society and implies a meaningful and deliberate collective separation from their own 'generation'. Stein's allusion to the persecution of the Israelites reinforces the representation of a group rejected by an authoritative or dominant culture. In paralleling her exodus from America with that of the Israelites from Egypt Stein expresses a messianic urgency for self-identification whilst also heightening the representation of singularity as a group identity.

The move from the USA to Europe and the various examples of artists escaping to the aesthetic freedom of Paris from other places in Europe is not just Stein's: as we can see in Marsden Hartley's journey 10 years later, it is a recurrent narrative in the development of Anglo-American and European modernism. This perhaps comes close to Jean-Michel Rabaté's characterisation of modernist collaboration: 'The dialectics of affiliation supposes the domination of a group mentality that finds its cohesion in a strange heterodox orthodoxy, reaching back to more ancient models so as to erase the



remnants of an inferior bourgeois culture while radically transforming the present'.<sup>11</sup> The 'older world' which enables 'strange forms to exist', is, in Stein's image of the maternal 'bosom', a place of rebirth. It appears to offer an attitude of tolerance different from the conservative bourgeois hegemony of the States – not more 'developed', but more complex. The matronly bosom and kindly comfort indicate the possibility of lateral spread rather than linear development: the old world is where Stein can open out. The necessity of group formation is partly a symptom of the conditions created by this kind of movement both in and into Europe, but, significantly, for Stein it is also impelled by a desire to establish a culture out of brotherhoods between those who feel themselves to be 'singular': those who respond to the dawn of the twentieth century with the rejection of what they perceive to be a stifling, oppressive and hidebound dominant culture.

### **The portrait form and Stein's early public persona**

In her essay on Picasso and Stein, Jane Bowers argues that Stein's self-identification as a practitioner of a new kind of art is clarified in her experience of over 80 sittings for Picasso's portrait of her, completed in 1906.<sup>12</sup> It was during this time that Stein began writing her own portraits of artists and writers on the Paris scene.<sup>13</sup> It is highly significant that after Picasso's painting of her, Stein begins to use the portrait form to signify other practitioners she identifies with: not just 'Picasso' and 'Matisse', but also 'Manguin: a painter' (1909), 'Nadelman' (1911), 'Guillaume Apollinaire' (1913) and 'Monsieur Vollard et Cezanne' (written in 1913 and published 1915). Previous 'portraits' had either attended to fictional figures, for example in an earlier form in *Three Lives* (begun in 1905), or had dealt with personal relationships, such as 'Ada' the portrait of Alice B Toklas 'written in the winter of 1908-9', which Janet Flanner claims 'was her first' true portrait.<sup>14</sup> In the works written and published between 1909

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<sup>11</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Ghosts of Modernity* (Gainesville: Florida University Press, 1996), p.191.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Palatini Bowers, 'Experiment in Time and Process of Discovery: Picasso Paints Gertrude Stein; Gertrude Stein Makes Sentences', in *Harvard Library Bulletin* 5: 2 (1994), 5-30.

<sup>13</sup> For other discussions of Picasso's portrait of Stein, see for example Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Michael Levenson, *Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Janet Flanner, 'A Frame for Some Portraits', in *'Two' and Other Early Portraits: Volume One of the Yale Edition of the Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951) pp.ix-xvii, p.x.

and 1915, Stein develops a new genre which dramatizes her relationships with other practitioners and gestures towards their collective endeavour. Picasso's portrait of Stein and her subsequent portrait of him complicate the roles of patron and practitioner by dislocating their positions and figuring as unstable components in a series of experiments which broaden questions of form out through genre and mode, and into experimentation with the whole apparatus of relations. This is further developed in her portrait of the wealthy American heiress Mabel Dodge. The 1913 'Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia' shifts the focus from artist to patron, and, as I will explain later, further emphasises and complicates those relations.

Stein's appropriation of the portrait genre from visual art into her literary production is significant. Sitting for Picasso's portrait of her was an experience of collective meaning-making which seemed to enable Stein to begin the move away from the influence of her brother, and to begin writing in earnest. Michael Levenson argues that Picasso's portrait of Stein and Stein's *Three Lives* are 'acts of portraiture' which 'prepared a more focused stage in the relation between Modernism and its audiences' and 'prepared for a new spectacle in Modernism'.<sup>15</sup> Stein is ostensibly, as the subject of Picasso's portrait, an investor in the painter's work, a patron, but the difficulty in the execution of the painting, the emphasis on process, the notion that the painting marks a crucial move away from representation and the uncomfortably mask-like quality of the image are all aspects which serve to overtly disrupt the painting's function as patron portrait. This genre, a feature of visual art since the Renaissance, is complicated in Picasso's painting in a way which Stein, as an art collector, must have been sensitive to.<sup>16</sup> The painting stands, not as a representation of Stein, but as a marker of the dramatic problematizing of representation as such. Rather than being simply a patron, Stein becomes engaged in a practice of experimentation. In producing portraits of Picasso and Matisse three years later, Stein puts herself on the other side of the frame, further troubling the patron and practitioner roles and the places they occupy on the cultural field. Until that point, as Bowers shows us, Stein

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<sup>15</sup> Levenson *Modernism*, p.94.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Louis A. Waldman and Brenda Preyer, 'The Rise of the Patronage Portrait in Late Renaissance Florence: An Enigmatic Portrait of Giovanni Di Paolo Rucellai and its Role in Family Commemoration', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 54 (2010), 133-154, and Jill Burke, *Changing Patrons: Social Identity and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Florence* (Philadelphia: Penn State University Press, 2004).

had been identified primarily alongside Leo as sponsor of and investor in the new art.<sup>17</sup> Stein's portraits of these artists are not just signifiers of her movement out of Leo's shadow; they also enable her to radically problematize her role and her position in the art world. Thus, it appears that the breakthrough for both Picasso and Stein represented by Picasso's portrait of her enabled Stein to perform a spectacular reassignment of her identity.

Stein's portraits in this period, rather than being private experiments, have a significant public function: to explicitly signal her engagement with these other figures and their practices. They enable Stein to declare a position, and they give her work validity and credibility. Indeed, the form of the portrait itself is a significant choice for these early works in that it engages as a mode in the construction and promotion of the persona of the sitter. Moreover, the act of producing portraits is a way for Stein to assert and, later, to publicise her position as a practitioner, and therefore they also construct a persona for Stein the modernist writer. The portrait also signifies the relationship of Stein with these painters in the very act of naming them. In a gestural function beyond content or form, the portraits dramatize Stein's relationship to key contemporary figures and create a recognisable public persona for her in relation to them.

Stein's portrait of Picasso reassigns the status of the portrait and therefore her own status as patron. Lawrence Rainey emphasises the necessity of patronage in creating a culture for the production and reception of modernist work, but I would suggest that Stein's complication represents the desire to reimagine that paradigm.<sup>18</sup> This is a collective experiment not just with technique but with cultural configurations: with the place and role of art and its relationship to social institutions. Stein's portraits at this point are portraits of other artists and as such they mirror the practice of painters who began to use like-minded artists as models because their work was not accepted by the traditional patron. As Gemma Blackshaw says of modernist painting in the notes to the exhibition *Facing the Modern* at London's National Gallery 'Few patrons

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<sup>17</sup> See Bowers, pp.16-21.

<sup>18</sup> See Rainey, p.39: 'More concretely, what had once been an aristocracy of patron-*salonniers* would now be replaced by an elite of patron-investors. For the Anglo-American avant-garde, the future lay in the new patronage provided by a small group of people such as John Quinn, Harriet Shaw Weaver, Scofield Thayer and James Sibley Watson, Jr'.

were willing to give a public face to their private lives. Here, fellow artists, family and friends played a vital supporting role. Many of the most audacious experiments in portraiture were made using such sitters'.<sup>19</sup> In writing portraits of other artists on the scene, Stein also positions herself as a writer within a group of experimental artists rather than simply as a patron investing in the art from outside the group. The portraits also achieve another very significant function: they fix Stein to a group identity, but one which is fluctuating and open to revision. They form a transient canon of 'brother singulars'. The temporary status of this 'canon' is emphasised both by the portraits' unfinished quality and by the genre itself, which presents individuals in a series, connected by Stein's treatment of them in a self-conscious dramatization of their assembly. Echoing the arrangement and rearrangement of paintings on her atelier wall, the collection represented by her portraits is a composition – a creative act of curation which both effaces the distinction between patronage and practice and generates a fluid assembly.

### **Stein's portraits in *Camera Work* 1912-1913**

In August 1912, Alfred Stieglitz, recognising Stein as a significant American figure on the scene of the new art, produced a special edition of his magazine *Camera Work* dedicated entirely to Stein's portraits of Matisse and Picasso as exemplary of 'the Post-Impressionist spirit'.<sup>20</sup> His use of the term 'Post-Impressionist' follows its coinage in Britain by Roger Fry – who had connections with the US, having held the position of curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from 1905 to 1907 – for his 1910 exhibition at the Grafton Galleries, *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, and the subsequent 1912 *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*. The American heiress Mabel Dodge, who, as well as being the subject of the 1913 portrait, was involved in the promotion of Stein's work at this point, also uses the term to describe the new art in her article on Stein in the 1913 edition of the journal *Arts and Decoration*, which she personally distributed at the 'International Exhibition of Modern Art' held in the New York Armory. The use of the term 'Post-Impressionism' here is contemporaneous with the use of 'modernism' in Marsden Hartley's letter to Stieglitz,

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<sup>19</sup> Gemma Blackshaw, *Facing the Modern, 9 October 2013-12 January 2014* (London: The National Gallery, 2013), n.4.

<sup>20</sup> Alfred Stieglitz, 'Advertisement', *Camera Work* no.13, (July 1912), p.1.

which suggests that 'modernism' and 'Post-Impressionism' were interchangeable or competing descriptions of the same activity. In June 1913 another special number of *Camera Work*, devoted to the New York Armory Show, emphasised Stein's developing affiliations by opening with the 'Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia', which had been promoted by Mabel Dodge herself to coincide with the Armory exhibition. Dodge had circulated the portrait amongst her New York acquaintances, as well as distributing her *Arts and Decoration* article at the show itself. In a further detail of this network of sponsorship, endorsement and promotion, the subject of Dodge's article was, of course, Stein's portrait of her.

Disseminated in these contexts, Stein's portraits signify a transatlantic modernist group and provide an American connection to the European modernist movements. This is not wholly a result of either Stieglitz's composition, Dodge's article, or her links to the Armory Show, however: Stein's portraits represent a new genre which enables her to offer a portrait of *herself* as an artist working within a 'modernist' or 'Post-Impressionist' group attempting to create and sustain a new context for the production and reception of their work. The 1913 portrait of Mabel Dodge, definitively a patron rather than a practitioner, is a way for Stein to further complicate her own role, capitalising on the promotion of Post-Impressionism in America in order to publicise her position as a practitioner under the patronage of a wealthy American.

It is highly significant, therefore, that Picasso's portrait of Stein was itself exhibited at the Armory Show shortly after Stieglitz's New York based journal had published Stein's portrait of Picasso, and whilst at the same time Dodge was distributing and publicising Stein's portrait of her. This confluence both signifies and initiates a context in which, with Stein as figurehead, American radicals are directly engaged in the production and dissemination of the new art. In the 1912 special number of *Camera Work*, the significance of Stein's work and her role in the group of Post-Impressionist artists is heightened by Stieglitz's introduction:

And it is precisely because, in these articles by Miss Stein, the Post-Impressionist spirit is found expressing itself in literary form that we thus lay them before the readers of CAMERA WORK in a specially prepared and supplemental number.<sup>21</sup>

The emphasis on the presentation of her texts to *Camera Work*'s American audience – one which had begun to engage with the new visual art but had little experience of the literary works – has the quality of a gesture; a theatrical flourish. Reading the text becomes an experience of the 'Post-Impressionist spirit', and in this sense Stieglitz presents Stein's portraits as manifestos for the movement he identifies. Spectacular, manifesto-led representations of groups proliferate in this period, exemplified perhaps in the 'quintessential modernist little magazine', Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound's *Blast*, published 2 years later in 1914.<sup>22</sup> The Vorticist manifesto which takes up 17 pages of the first issue, despite claims made to 'THE UNCONSCIOUSNESS OF HUMANITY' and 'an art of Individuals', is in its very nature the representation of a self-conscious group.<sup>23</sup> The manifesto itself is signed by a list of artists and writers representing the group, and a significant aspect of its message is formed by the ironic proclamations about who is in and who is out which bookend the 'BLAST' and 'BLESS' sections. The sense of a conscious theoretical group position on the function of art in *Blast* is reasserted in a series of overtly theatrical gestures. Indeed, the second tenet of the 'BLESS' section of the manifesto is an exhortation to 'BLESS the HAIRDRESSER', who provides them 'clean arched shapes' and 'angular plots'.<sup>24</sup> This reference to self-fashioning as such a prominent – if tongue-in-cheek – aspect of the manifesto signifies a meaningful knowingness about the construction of a group image. The declaration of allegiance to a group becomes a spectacle, a gesture designed to draw attention to the distinctiveness of this particular configuration of the new art. Just as the 'organised disturbance' of *Blast*'s two publications, alongside the 1915 exhibition at the Dore Gallery, drew attention to the group as a collective intervention into the scene of modernism, so the 1912 special edition of *Camera Work* presented the grouping of Stein, Matisse and Picasso as a powerful collective entity

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<sup>21</sup> Stieglitz, *Camera Work* no.13, p.1

<sup>22</sup> Quotation taken from the Modernist Journals Project introductory page on *Blast*, [http://dl.lib.brown.edu/mjp/render.php?id=1158591480633184&view=mjp\\_object](http://dl.lib.brown.edu/mjp/render.php?id=1158591480633184&view=mjp_object)

<sup>23</sup> *BLAST: Review of the Great English Vortex*, 1, ed. by Wyndham Lewis (London: John Lane, the Bodley Head) 1914, pp.7-8.

<sup>24</sup> *BLAST*, p.25.

intervening in the usual run of the magazine, in the scene of American culture and, indeed, in the conceptualisation of the category of 'Post-Impressionism'.<sup>25</sup>

With their inclusion in Stieglitz's magazine the portraits of Matisse and Picasso become aspects of another composition which affords another set of meanings, engaged in signifying the work of group activity. The advertisement in the July edition of Stieglitz's *Camera Work* announces the August magazine as a 'special number of *Camera Work* devoted to the essays of Miss Gertrude Stein on Matisse and Picasso'.<sup>26</sup> This places Stein's texts in a privileged position in relation to the works of art: the special edition sees her as the centre of this alliance. Stein's prominence in the group is further promoted by the characterisation of the reproductions of the Picasso and Matisse paintings as illustrations rather than as the subjects of Stein's texts. The advertisement presents the special edition as a showcase for Stein's 'essays' which is 'illustrated with fourteen full-page plates of the work of these artists'.<sup>27</sup> This presentation of the portraits reinforces the effectiveness of their function in situating Stein publically as a key figure in a contemporary group. It also draws a direct parallel between her texts and visual art, hinting at some essential identification between them which offers a way in to the new art.

Following this, the 'Editorial' in the August special edition which prefaces the essays and paintings is unequivocal about Stein's centrality:

But while it so happens that one of these articles treats of Henri Matisse and the other of Pablo Picasso; and while the text is accompanied by fourteen reproductions of representative paintings and sculptures by these artists; the fact is that these articles themselves, and not either the subjects with which they deal or the illustrations that accompany them, are the true *raison d'être* of this special issue.<sup>28</sup>

In a development of the representation in the 'advertisement', Stein comes to signify more intensely an essential quality of 'Post-Impressionism'. Stieglitz, however, also reveals something significant about the nature of her texts themselves. The advertisement refers to them as 'essays', the Editorial calls them 'articles', and yet he explicitly draws our attention away from their referential function in relation either to

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<sup>25</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting & Bombardiering* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1937), p.32.

<sup>26</sup> Stieglitz, *Camera Work* no.13, p.1

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Alfred Stieglitz, 'Editorial' in *Camera Work* Special Edition (August 1912), p.1. Further references to the Editorial are given after quotations in the text.

their subject matter or to the paintings with which he juxtaposes them. He wants to assign a stable and identifiable genre to the texts, but this attempt fails in its very articulation. It is 'the articles themselves' which demand our attention, not as theoretical or critical explanations which stand outside the practice, but as examples of that practice. Stieglitz also claims that:

These articles bear, to current interpretative criticism, a relation exactly analogous to that borne by the work of the men of whom they treat to the painting and sculpture of the older schools.

So close, indeed, is this analogy that they will doubtless be regarded by many as no less absurd, unintelligible, radical or revolutionary than the so-called vagaries of the painters whom they seek to interpret (1).

In the world of 'Post-Impressionism', described as analogous to the hegemonic world of 'current interpretive criticism' and the 'older schools', Stein occupies the role of 'interpretive' critic. In this representation, the group to which Stein belongs is a self-contained alternative to mainstream culture, and the critic of mainstream culture has an 'other' in Stein. Yet, as his earlier declaration shows, Stein's writing does not fulfil the function of interpretation. Stieglitz's uncertainty about the discourse mode the portraits present reflects the instability generated by the form, content and indeterminate genre of the texts. At the same time as offering this direct comparison with the establishment art and its critics, Stieglitz himself complicates the analogy by emphasising the ambiguous function of Stein's pieces: they resemble mainstream critical writing, but in an alternative paradigm which enables them to play a very different role. For Stieglitz, they are:

a Rosetta stone of comparison; a decipherable clew to that intellectual and esthetic attitude which underlies and inspires the movement upon one phase of which they are comments and of the extending development of which they are themselves an integral part (1).

In the comparison to the Rosetta stone, they offer not an explanation but a decryption key to the way in which Post-Impressionist art makes meaning.<sup>29</sup> The reference to her work as 'a decipherable clew', in its archaic spelling of 'clue', alludes to the ball of thread used by Theseus to trace his own path through the labyrinth: the portraits will lead us safely into the world of Post-Impressionism. These comparisons function to present a developed and complex culture, echoing as they do the discovery of the

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<sup>29</sup> For a detailed discussion of this metaphor in the context of genre, see Ulla Haselstein, 'Gertrude Stein's Portraits of Matisse and Picasso' in *New Literary History*, 34: 4, (2003), 723-743.



remains of the ancient Egyptian and Greek cultures whose complexity can be seen in the fragments they have left behind. The images of myth and artefact appear to offer glimpses of a total and self-sufficient universe of meaning which Stieglitz encourages his readers to enter, using Stein's texts as both example and guide. In encountering Stein's texts, Stieglitz's readers arrive in the culture of 'Post-Impressionism'.

Stieglitz's descriptions of Stein's portraits of Matisse and Picasso as 'a Rosetta stone' and 'a decipherable clew' are in some ways apposite. Like the Rosetta stone, they are a fragment of a culture and represent metonymically a larger field of meaning, and like Theseus's thread, the long repetitive sentences lead overlapping formations in the looping motions of a path in a labyrinth. The labyrinth, however, does not lead us into an arcane 'other' culture as separate from the mainstream scene as an ancient culture seen from the distance of a thousand years, nor do they reflect, like the Rosetta stone, a culture that is only accessible through a process of decoding. Indeed, I would argue that the portraits explicitly resist both of the concepts these metaphors propose. They do not offer a way in to a distinct unified culture and nor do they function, like the Rosetta stone, as a code which can be mapped across genres to reveal a definitive formula for understanding a separate 'other' culture outside the cultural field as it is understood. Rather than showing us a discrete cultural formation which sustains a position outside or on the margins of the established cultural field, they replicate and enact the processes involved in attempt to enter, appropriate and transform that field.

### **Reading Stein's portraits of Picasso and Matisse**

Both 'Picasso' and 'Matisse' appear at first to be portraits of two individuals and representations of their behaviour or being. 'Picasso' opens with the lines:

One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming. One whom some were following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were following was one who was certainly completely charming.<sup>30</sup>

The repeated references to Picasso's charm and the emphasis on his followers reflect his characteristics as an individual and his effect on those around him. Rather than

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<sup>30</sup> All references to this text are from Gertrude Stein, 'Picasso', in *Camera Work* Special Edition (August 1912), p.4.

representing his work and its importance, it seems to be a portrait of Picasso's general character and his personal potency. The repetition of 'charming' identifies the most striking feature of his character and offers a sense of the experience of being in his company. An insistence on his individuality is created by the repeated grammatical foregrounding of 'one' and the repetition of 'who'. The first paragraph of 'Matisse' is also intent on his personal qualities and experiences, using the repetition of 'one' and 'he' but evoking a more hesitant and sensitive personality and presenting a more introverted and isolated character. The sentences replicate an internal process in which Matisse personally comes to an acceptance of himself, characterised simply as the development of certainty about 'what he was doing' and contrasting with Picasso's confidence and popularity:

One was quite certain that for a long part of his being one being living he had been trying to be certain that he was wrong in doing what he was doing and then when he could not come to be certain that he had been wrong in doing what he had been doing, when he had completely convinced himself that he would not come to be certain that he had been wrong in doing what he had been doing he was really certain then that he was a great one and he certainly was a great one. Certainly every one could be certain of this thing that this one is a great one.<sup>31</sup>

Matisse's personal development is embodied in Stein's text as an oscillating drift, a gradual coming to terms with his own value. The paragraph is made up of two sentences, the first of which is long and repetitive, figuring the gradual change in the artist's consciousness, from 'trying to be certain that he was wrong in what he was doing', to being 'really certain then that he was a great one'. The second is rather shorter, clarifying the position reached at the end of this part of the process as one in which 'Certainly everyone could be certain of this thing that this one is a great one'.

The second sentence in 'Matisse' however marks a shift in emphasis. With its reference to 'everyone', it suggests that these judgements about value are made not by the individual but by others around him. In this second sentence, in which 'everyone could be certain', the gathering of the group around this conviction has a crucial role. The movement into certainty is engendered by the coordination of a set of related positions which validate the individual's activity, and this appears to be a necessary condition for 'what he was doing' to take on its full meaning. The second sentence

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<sup>31</sup> All references to this text are from Gertrude Stein, 'Matisse', in *Camera Work* Special Edition August 1912), p.2.

therefore looks much more like the representation of a response to Matisse's art and the formation of a consensus about the artist's activity and its value. Similarly, the second paragraph in 'Picasso' shifts the emphasis from the personal qualities of the subject of the portrait to a group's response to the subject's activity: 'Some were certainly following and were certain that the one they were then following was one working and was one bringing out of himself then something'. Picasso is 'working' and, rather than being something, he is bringing something 'out of himself'. Shifting from the grammatical foregrounding in the first paragraph of the individual subject of the portrait ('one') to the foregrounding in the second paragraph of the group ('some') who were following him, the emphasis moves, as it does in 'Matisse', from an image of the artist to a representation of the responses to his work.

The second paragraph of 'Matisse', clarifying the reference to 'everybody' in the first paragraph, develops the representation of the group around Matisse's work: 'Some said of him, when anybody believed in him they did not then believe in any other one. Certainly some said this of him'. The first sentence performs two functions. First, it indicates the division of opinion on Matisse's art into those who are grouped around it and those who are not; and second, it proposes that accepting the kind of art it represents is an act of faith which rejects other forms, a narrative of rupture and opposition familiar in manifestos of this period. What Stein signifies here is a conscious recognition of the necessity for the new art to generate new contexts in which it can be meaningfully received. In 'Matisse', however, Stein complicates this because she uses the notion of certainty ironically to figure a new understanding of all these cultural values as in fact unstable and shifting. The continued repetition of the adjective 'certain' and the adverb 'certainly' from the opening passage and throughout the text draws the attention again and again to the instability of such convictions about the value of a work of art and emphasises the contingent nature of these judgements. Certainty becomes a transitory position, a provisional conviction around which consensus gathers. This foregrounds the role of the group in defining and holding a set of attitudes on a shifting cultural field. Rather than representing a fixed and separate culture which exists in a self-contained space outside the mainstream, the group assembles a new temporary location on the field.

The portrait of Picasso also places emphasis on the role of the group in establishing consensus for cultural values. In both the portraits, certainty merely signifies a position around which consensus has gathered. The modulations represented by the repetitive, oscillating and accretive uses of language and syntax in 'Matisse' are also present in 'Picasso' and come to embody the processes through which groups are assembling around these new ideas about art. 'Picasso', like 'Matisse', uses references to certainty in order to represent a scene of fluctuation and instability in which the group – the 'some' who were 'following' Picasso – gather and shift around his work, that which he is 'bringing out of himself'.

Some were certainly following and were certain that the one they were then following was one working and was one bringing out of himself then something. Some were certainly following and were certain that the one they were then following was one bringing out of himself then something that was coming to be a heavy thing, a solid thing and a complete thing.

One whom some were certainly following was one working and certainly was one bringing something out of himself then and was one who had been all his living had been one having something coming out of him.

Something had been coming out of him, certainly it had been coming out of him, certainly it was something, certainly it had been coming out of him and it had meaning, a charming meaning, a solid meaning, a struggling meaning, a clear meaning.

The repetition of 'certainly' and 'completely' to describe both Picasso and his followers in the opening paragraphs at first appears to offer a sense of that which is reliable and constant, particularly in combination with the other signifiers of stability and fixedness used to describe Picasso's work such as 'heavy' and 'solid'. This is complicated, however, by the indeterminacy of both the 'something' these adjectives describe and the references to less stable qualities such as 'charming' and 'struggling' in the description of Picasso's work as having contradictory qualities 'a charming meaning, a solid meaning, a struggling meaning, a clear meaning'. The instability of these adjectives is also a function of the fact that they are formed from the present participle and therefore associate with movement and transience. The alternation between clarity and solidity, charm and struggle suggests that this kind of oscillation and the ambiguity it throws up is, in itself, what characterises both Picasso's work and cultural responses to it.

This shifting or drifting of the group from one unstable certainty to another is clearly reflected in the final paragraph of 'Matisse':

Some were certainly wanting to be doing what this one was doing that is were wanting to be ones clearly expressing something. Some of such of them did not go on in being ones wanting to be doing what this one was doing that is in being ones clearly expressing something. Some went on being ones wanting to be doing what this one was doing that is, being ones clearly expressing something. Certainly this one was one who was a great man. Any one could be certain of this thing. Every one would come to be certain of this thing. This one was one, some were quite certain, one greatly expressing something being struggling. This one was one, some were quite certain, one not greatly expressing something being struggling.

The repetition of the the nebulous pronoun ‘some’ and the references to ‘Any one’ and ‘Every one’ has individual subjectivity and group culture inextricably bound together. Moreover, the mode of the text itself with its weblike form and its shifting accretions and definitions defies the linearity of the labyrinth and emphasises instead the convolutions in the process of moving from A to B. Indeed, the final sentences do not constitute an arrival. In closing the portrait with opposing positions, Stein suspends Matisse himself in the drift. This sustains the oscillating rhythms of the syntax without allowing a conclusion, emphasising the tension generated by Matisse’s work. This final inconclusive wrangle places Matisse’s work in a persistent equivocal position, not fully accepted but accepted by some, an expression of the status of his work at that very moment in history.

In both portraits, the ambiguity of these artists’ work and the attendant ambivalence of its reception are articulated in the word ‘struggling’. Ostensibly, this proposes an image of the struggling artist – a marginal figure denied entry to the pantheon and whose work is yet to be valued for its true worth. Stein’s use of this word, however, complicates the picture of the artist’s struggle from the margins into the mainstream, instead emphasising the meaningful complexity of the act of intervention itself. In ‘Matisse’ she repeatedly uses the present participle ‘struggling’ either as a gerund or to modify a noun rather than in conjunction with an auxiliary verb to indicate action. In repeating such phrases as ‘the greatness of struggling’, and ‘he was greatly expressing something struggling’, Stein denies the potential of the word ‘struggling’ to participate in the formation of a verb – to denote action. This, however, is counteracted by the image the word conjures up: that of unceasing movement. What we are presented with is a static image of continuous action. The implication here is that the struggle is a necessary feature of Matisse’s work, an idea which is also articulated in the repeated insistence that he is ‘expressing something being

struggling' (with 'being' and 'struggling' as adjectival participles modifying the noun 'something'). He is not struggling to express, he is expressing the existence of the struggle itself. The context in which the work of art intervenes is not fixed, and this proposes a vision of the cultural field as inherently unstable and the status of the work as shifting and both defined by and defining the cultural context in its fluctuations.

These portraits do not reflect a desire for a unified alternative culture outside the field to replace what Stieglitz calls the 'older schools' and their 'current interpretive criticism'. Rather, they suggest that these groups form the activity of a multiple, heterogeneous and unstable field. Stein's portraits provide an active and live conceptualisation of these individual artists as moving nodes in a cultural field continually assembled and disassembled, both forming and formed by the consensus which gives them meaning. These early portraits, rather than representing either a series of private experiments located outside the public sphere, or a sealed and self-reflexive entity divorced from the existing cultural context, or a total rejection of the institutions which form the context for the reception of works of art, in fact offer a profound engagement with that sphere, with those institutions and with that context. Indeed, those engagements form the subject matter of these texts and largely determine their form, their mode and the method of their dissemination.

### **The 1913 Armory Show and Stein's 'Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia'**

The 1913 portrait of Mabel Dodge further complicates Stein's role as patron. Neither a personal rendering of an intimate relationship, nor a fictional or unidentified subject, nor a portrait of another artist, the 'Portrait of Mabel Dodge' ostensibly appears to operate more along the lines of artists' portraits of Ambroise Vollard. Vollard, the Parisian art dealer whose patronage was crucial for the dissemination of French Post-impressionist works, was depicted in portraits by, among others, Cezanne (1899), Bonnard (1904), Renoir (1908), and Picasso (1910). The portraits of this figure are clearly opportunities to express respect, even homage, but they also often typify the painters' work at that moment, subjecting the image of the patron to radical formal experimentation in a way which emphasises his support for their endeavours as 'refusés'. The Steins knew Vollard well and bought paintings from him – indeed,

Stein's portrait of him, which I will discuss shortly, attests to this – and, with her interest in Cezanne's work and her friendship with Picasso, Stein must have been aware of these representations of Vollard as representations of dealer, promoter and patron. Although Dodge in many ways performs the same role for Stein, there are differences in the execution of Stein's portrait, in the role it confers on Mabel Dodge and in the function it is assigned which make it once again an example of her complication of the relative status and institutional roles of the artist, the patron and the work of art. Alex Goody argues that, although 'The "Portrait of Mabel Dodge" is neither a typical nor exceptional "example" of Stein's modernist becoming', it is 'as an event' in fact 'incredibly productive'.<sup>32</sup> The portrait is indeed productive because of the way in which it promotes Stein's image as a practitioner of the new art. I would also identify a much more significant role for this portrait, however: this text in fact problematizes the relationship between author, portrait, subject and patron in a way which performs a fruitful destabilising of those categories. I would also argue that this destabilisation is expressed again in the way in which the text is disseminated.

Firstly, it is significant that, as Goody suggests, the portrait is not 'exceptional'. Unlike the portraits of Vollard – Cezanne's extraordinary mask-like face, Picasso's extreme deconstruction of the image – Stein's portrait of Dodge in many ways seems less 'experimental' than any of her other portraits of this period. The portrait can be read, as Dodge suggests in her article on the portrait, as 'a series of impressions' which produce 'a coherent totality'.<sup>33</sup> The opening sentence 'The days are wonderful and the nights are wonderful and the life is pleasant', presents in conventional terms the experience of a holiday in a beautiful place, suggesting directly Stein's own experience of staying at the Villa Curonia.<sup>34</sup> The repetition of the phrase 'So much breathing' in the third paragraph gives the impression of a meditative space, the references to objects and spaces in the Villa such as 'the hall', 'blankets', 'A bottle', 'the bed', 'a garden', 'the vase', provide a drifting sense of place, and the distinctive line 'This is this bliss' expresses the sensual pleasure of a restful holiday (465-467). Read like this, the text is much more denotational than Stein's other portraits, offering

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<sup>32</sup> Alex Goody, *Modernist Articulations*, p.54

<sup>33</sup> Mabel Dodge, 'Speculations', in *Camera Work* Special Number (June 1913), 6-9 (p.8).

<sup>34</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Carl Van Vechten (New York: Random House, 1946), pp.465-468 (p.465). Further references to the edition are given after quotations in the text. Stein and Toklas visited the Villa in autumn 1912. See Everett, p.60.

an example of what Dodge calls 'impressionistic writing'.<sup>35</sup> This portrait, then, is rather pretty and pleasing, a portrait of Dodge as a dispersed and languid influence who does not urge innovative experimentation and instead prompts a response more reminiscent of Impressionism than of Post-Impressionism.

So, unlike the experimentation which appears to be prompted in the various depictions of Vollard, in the 'Portrait of Mabel Dodge' the subject is not represented in the work as a figure who cultivates a radical response. The portrait of Dodge also lacks the urgent driving repetitions of Stein's portraits of Matisse and Picasso. She does not appear as a substantial force in the text, contrasting sharply both with the radical treatment of the subject in the artists' portraits of Vollard and with the shifting and gathering of forces around Matisse and Picasso in Stein's portraits of them. Indeed, the text is as much a portrait of the Villa Curonia as it is of Mabel Dodge. A fifteenth-century Medici palace, the Villa is a signifier of Dodge's position as patron, locating her in the space inhabited by the wealthiest and most influential patrons of the Renaissance. The portrait, however, appears to diminish the power this position might confer: the text depicts a rather bland space filled with gentle distractions. There is an emphasis on expressions of lack which occurs in the continual use of negations that characterise the text: 'They did not darken', 'It had not all the meaning', 'This is not heartening', 'It is not inundated', 'There is the climate which is not existing' (465). The association of Mabel Dodge and the Villa with lack and loss is also signified more explicitly in the lines, 'There can be that lack of any quivering', and 'An open object is establishing the loss that there was when the vase was not inside the place', and in references to reduction and nothingness such as 'vanishing', 'evaporating', 'lessening', 'disappearing', and 'absence' (466; 467; 465-466). Similarly, the disembodied narrative seems to offer observations but these appear generalised and indiscriminate, recording a state of affairs in a disjointed series of indeterminate declaratives. Most of the sentences in the text are existential, very often beginning with the phrase 'There is'. This phrase denotes a static condition, expressing simply the notion of existence or, in the negative examples, non-existence. Moreover, it is a device for leaving the subject position vacant of content. The existential 'there' – and the empty 'it' which Stein also uses in this text – do not refer

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<sup>35</sup> Dodge, p.6.



to any object or entity: they represent dummy subject forms which enable Stein as observer to disappear. They also suggest a condition or state in time and space which, repeated throughout the text, provides a focus on the Villa and on the state of things as they are. This gathers iteration in the final paragraph: 'There is all there is when there has all there has where there is what there is' (468). In this sentence, the existential 'there' repeats to emptiness because the corresponding state or condition is not named. The Villa becomes a space of empty nothingness observed from nowhere.

In a letter inviting her to return to the Villa in July 1913, Dodge encourages Stein to take up the position of writer-in-residence at the Villa, her function to document the kind of transgressive activity Dodge finds so thrilling: 'Please come down here soon – the house is full of pianists, painters, pederasts, prostitutes, and peasants. Great material'.<sup>36</sup> Dodge wants Stein to observe the bohemian goings-on at the Villa and to record them for a breathless posterity. Dodge's letter imagines fixed roles for herself, Stein, the subjects of Stein's art and the audience for it. Stein's portrait of Dodge, however, has already resisted these categories and challenged the very paradigm which constructs them. In its execution the subject of the portrait herself disappears, replaced by generalised activity, and rather than having Dodge as a central figure around which energy gathers, the portrait suggests instead a dispersal of energies. An uncertainty about the relative status of the artist and the patron is also generated by the absence of the artist's own observing subject-position. This plurality denies the homage to an individual patron whose actions have a definitive effect on the value and reception of the modernist artwork. The figures of patron, artist and audience are dissolved in a series of generalised states and activities. The patron, therefore, does not have a special status, and the roles of patron, artist, subject and audience are not fixed or determined.

The blurring of these distinctions is also reflected in the way in which the text is produced, promoted and distributed. Dodge had 300 copies of the text printed and bound in Florentine wallpaper with a lavish floral pattern of large and colourful blooms, and she personally touted them around New York at the time of the Armory Show in February 1913. This action at once performs two opposing functions.

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<sup>36</sup> Dodge to Stein, c. July 1913. Everett, p.202.

Dodge's manifestation of the text presents Stein's work as a decorative object in a way which makes it more acceptable and emphasises Dodge's connection to Florence, to art history and perhaps even to a Renaissance notion of the patron. The portrait's distribution to coincide with the Armory Show, however, which, as Dodge put it in a letter to Stein was the 'wonderful great show' to which 'All the moderns [are] sending over', is a signifier of its modernity.<sup>37</sup> Dodge's letters to Stein reveal the activity of her patronage: 'Already people tell me that everywhere, on account of my judicious scattering of the Portrait everyone is saying "Who is Gertrude Stein? Who is Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia?"',<sup>38</sup> Dodge's 'judicious' activity places Stein's text firmly in the context of the controversial works of art on display in order to identify both Stein – and Dodge herself – with the explosion of modernism onto the American scene. The function of the portrait as a method for displaying a group identity is here clearly fulfilled: Stein and Dodge have become 'names'. Indeed, the association of Stein with modern artworks is evident in responses to the show in the press, whose mockery often took the form of doggerels such as this example from the Chicago *Tribune* column 'A line o' type or two:'

I called the canvas *Cow with cud*  
And hung it on the line,  
Although to me 'twas clear as mud,  
'Twas clear to Gertrude Stein.<sup>39</sup>

The text is also given further status by Dodge's article, which was published in the March edition of the magazine *Arts and Decoration* and sold at the Armory Show itself.<sup>40</sup> The article emphasises the difficulty of the text, both reflecting and encouraging the kind of response articulated by the tabloid doggerel in the assertion of its status in its association with modernist artworks and in Stein's association with modernist artists. This is exemplified by Dodge's claim, early in the article, that:

She has taken the English language and, according to many people, has misused it, or has used it roughly, uncouthly and brutally, or madly, stupidly and hideously, but by her method she is finding the hidden and inner nature of nature.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Dodge to Stein, c. January 1913. Everett, p.152.

<sup>38</sup> Dodge to Stein, January 27<sup>th</sup> 1913. Everett, p.163.

<sup>39</sup> February 8<sup>th</sup> 1913, quoted in Milton Brown *The Story of the Armory Show* (New York: The Joseph H Hirshhorn Foundation, 1964) p.111.

<sup>40</sup> The article was reprinted in the June 1913 Special Number of Stieglitz's magazine *Camera Work*. References to the text are taken from this publication. See n.32.

<sup>41</sup> Dodge 'Speculations', p.6.

The controversy surrounding Stein's work is given emphasis because it is potentially productive, and her association with other artists becomes very much an aspect of the work in its distribution and promotion. The clamour caused by Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* – which drew the most comment and derision in the press – did more to promote than to condemn the work, which sold for \$324, more than any of his previous works had. Indeed, all four of Duchamp's paintings sold, making him one of the most successful artists in the show.<sup>42</sup> It is Stein's association with these groups and their controversial experiments which is promoted by Dodge's activities, and Stein's practice is therefore meaningful because of this context. Dodge's article aligns the portrait directly with the works of art in the show, asserting that 'Gertrude Stein is doing with words what Picasso is doing with paint', her work representing the 'new manifestation in esthetics'. As in Stieglitz's presentation, Stein's work exemplifies the 'Post-Impressionist spirit', the realisation of a spontaneous aesthetic activity unattributable to individual agency.

Stein's text, however, is not simply the literary equivalent of visual art's experiments in technique. The construction by Dodge of the text as an object, its distribution around the Armory Show and the promotion of its association with Picasso's portrait of Stein make it a result of all these activities. It is made by Stein, by Dodge, by Picasso and by the Armory Show. The significance of dispersed activity embodied and reflected in the portrait itself is therefore reiterated in its modes of production and distribution. Stein's response to Dodge's promotion: 'I am completely delighted with your performances', is telling in that it presents Dodge as an actor in the spectacle of modernism.<sup>43</sup> It is a response to the way in which Dodge represents her own involvement in a highly dramatized form which seems to suggest make-believe or fabrication. In her account of a conversation with the editor of *Arts and Decoration*, for example, she tells Stein 'Then I said "Of course Miss Stein is a professional & you must pay her for the article even if it is a nominal sum otherwise I cannot consider it."' Her use of quotation and her rhetorical emphasis ('of course'; 'you must'; 'I cannot') suggests a scripted performance of the role of a professional's representative, made all the more theatrical because Stein's status was so much more tenuous and

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<sup>42</sup> See Brown *The Story of the Armory Show*, p.104; p.108.

<sup>43</sup> Stein to Dodge early February 1913. Everett, p.169.

uncertain than Dodge's language suggests. What is also reflected in these letters, however, is Dodge's belief that her performances create something real. Her assertion 'I have made all NY and the suburbs talk about you. Now is the time for the publishers and they know it' shows the move from ephemeral talk to actual publication.<sup>44</sup> Dodge has an active role in the construction of a cultural context for the reception of Stein's work, and it is a construction which relies upon the backdrop of the Armory Show, on the spectacle of the shocking works of art, on the portrait as gesture, and on Dodge's performance in the social circles of New York. These performances become actions in the cultural sphere as fabrication takes a material form. In its distribution, 'The Portrait of Mabel Dodge' becomes an intermedial text. It is a work of literature which replicates the modes of visual art in its newly acquired status as a beautiful, 'authentic' object and in its appropriation of the portrait genre. Its role as gesture or spectacle and its method of distribution as performance, however, also have the properties of theatre.

The serial production of the 'Portrait of Mabel Dodge' and its refashioning as a material object which is reproducible and can be distributed as part of the spectacle of modernism provided by the Armory show means that it is a modernist *event* collectively produced, one which destabilises the categories of artist, patron, subject, audience and media. This belies the image of Stein as an exceptional or disjunctive writer the meaning of whose works can be traced to an arcane project carried out in a private sphere divorced from public culture. The significance of Stein's portraits is as much in their status as events as in their complex and unusual forms. Both these aspects form the meaning of Stein's practice, and both aspects must be read as conscious engagements with their moment in literary history.

### **Stein in the market: 'M. Vollard et Cézanne'**

Stein is therefore practitioner and patron, experimental writer and 'name' at the same time, and this reading of her activity challenges the notion of the early private experimenter versus the later commodified icon. Rather than existing in a disjunctive space outside the logic of commodification as the Language poets, and both

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<sup>44</sup> Dodge to Stein January 27<sup>th</sup> 1913. Everett, p.163.

Quartermain and Dydo claim, I would argue that, instead, Stein as artist, as promoter and as investor, inhabits the institution of the market itself both in conventional ways and as a space of experimentation. The culture of acquisition is ready-made when she arrives in Paris in 1902, exemplified by the figure of the art dealer Vollard, the subject of her ‘M. Vollard and Cézanne’, and she engages directly and meaningfully with this context, as this portrait itself shows us. Written in 1913 and published in order to promote Vollard’s 1914 biography of Cézanne, the portrait was included by the art critic Henry McBride in his section of the Sunday edition of the *New York Sun* in October 1915.<sup>45</sup> McBride, a friend of Stein’s who had visited her in Paris earlier that year, often used the review section of the *Sun* to discuss and publicise the new art forms, was involved in the promotion of Alfred Stieglitz’s 291 gallery, and remained a champion of Stein throughout her career. In McBride’s 1915 article, the poem and its publication in the *Sun* are explicitly framed as acts of promotion for Vollard’s book, for Stein’s writing, for McBride’s reputation as an American critic of the new art, and for the paper itself: ‘nothing less than a wonderful new poem by Miss Gertrude Stein that now appears for the first time anywhere in the world! It is apropos of the new volume and is entitled “M. Vollard et Cézanne.”’<sup>46</sup> Adding that ‘Doubtless collectors will desire copies of the poem to paste in their Cézanne volumes’ and ‘M. Vollard may now consider himself immortalised’, McBride presents the poem as an act of immortalisation for Vollard not just because it has been written by Stein but also because it has been published in the paper – it is only ‘now’ that Vollard is immortalised, and the poem, being made available in the *Sun*, becomes a collector’s item which can be added to the book to preserve the moment of Vollard’s exaltation and to give his volume more value.

The article also promotes Stein’s image as an uncompromisingly modern personality on the Paris scene and a difficult experimental writer and, by association, promotes McBride’s own modernity and the cutting-edge credentials of the paper in printing the poem. When McBride says ‘Dull people may sigh for an explanation of this delightful little compound of satire and realism but Miss Stein doesn’t write for dull people’, he frames the unsympathetic audience as ‘dull’ and his own response and

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<sup>45</sup> Ambroise Vollard, *Paul Cézanne* (Paris: Vollard, 1914).

<sup>46</sup> Henry McBride, ‘Art News and Comment’, *New York Sun*, 10 October 1915, Fifth Section Special Feature Magazine, p.12. All references to the article from this page.

therefore that of the paper – the poem is actually ‘delightful’ – as enlightened. McBride also quotes ‘one of Miss Stein’s letters of last May’, written to him, ‘telling the pleasure she took in Vollard’s visit when he arrived in a cab piled high with his Cézannes’, another indication of McBride’s relationship to Stein which also serves to portray his own place on the transatlantic art scene. Framing the letter as ‘a companion piece to the poem’ which is ‘not to be regarded as an explanation of the poem, but as an accompaniment’, McBride also effectively uses the letter to offer his audience a translation of the poem whilst repeatedly insisting that it cannot be translated. This enables the unsure reader to get a grip on the work and thus potentially expands Stein’s audience without seeming to damage the integrity of the text, the ‘explanation’ of which he considers a ‘sin’.

The letter McBride quotes does indeed provide details which illuminate the text. What it reveals most significantly for this discussion is a picture of Vollard’s complex position as dealer, promoter and, now, as writer. Stein’s letter reflects the anxiety involved in the complication of these roles: “‘he wants some public recognition of his literary efforts...he comes in great haste...with original paintings and drawings and reproductions and a page of the text and asks to be admired, and you do.’” There is discomfort in this desire for ‘public recognition’ and in the direct appeal for Stein’s appreciation - he ‘asks to be admired’. Stein’s note that this is accompanied by ‘great haste’ evokes both the frenetic activity, even the feigned exclusivity, of Vollard the salesman, and a kind of embarrassment, a fear of rejection, felt by Vollard the writer. ‘He wants’ and ‘[he] asks’ also suggest a measure of desperation. The letter is interesting as a discourse on the shifting and unstable positions and roles engendered and necessitated by the new art forms and their relations to the contemporary context. It is about more than Vollard, however. Stein says “‘I have done rather a nice sketch of him’” but the poem is also a sketch of Stein’s own multiple and often contradictory positions as host, as buyer, and as artist.<sup>47</sup>

The poem presents fragments of the encounter from the position of Stein the appreciative host, expressing how careful she is to give him the ‘recognition’ and

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<sup>47</sup> Gertrude Stein, letter to Henry McBride, in Henry McBride, ‘Art News and Comment’, *New York Sun*, 10 October 1915, Fifth Section Special Feature Magazine, p.12. All references to the letter are from this page.

admiration which, as she indicates in the letter, he desires and she bestows ('[he] asks to be admired, and you do'). The sense of Vollard's rather embarrassed haste is also reflected in Stein's hostly courtesies, 'Please me/By staying', 'Please do be seated' and in the final line's amused summation: 'That's the end of that'.<sup>48</sup> It is also coloured, however, by the role of Stein the investor. The line, 'Its pretty, its nice', towards the end of the text, evokes the repeated assurances Stein offers, and, in its phatic emptiness, reflects the mode both of reassuring friend and politely reluctant buyer. This comes after a representation of the flurry of exhibits, of the paintings and reproductions and presumably the 'page of the text' from Vollard's book on Cézanne, proffered for both a friend's admiration and a buyer's investment. Snatches of this exchange are suggested by:

I talk.  
Pigeon.  
Stream.

M. Vollard et Cézanne.  
Histoires des bonnes.  
Histoires des femmes.

The form of short, minor or truncated sentences and end-stopped lines seen here and used throughout the poem, also reflect the 'great haste' Stein comments on in her letter, conveying Vollard's rushed flourishing of objects and ideas for Stein's recognition and appreciation. It is unclear whether the first person speaker of 'I talk' is Stein or Vollard, so it can be read either as Stein's tactful politesse, a background murmur to smooth Vollard's way, or perhaps as Vollard's uncouth blurting. 'Pigeon./Stream'. is almost certainly a reference to the paintings or reproductions Vollard hurriedly displays: Cézanne's 1890 *Le Pigeonnier à Bellevue* (*The Pigeon Tower at Bellevue*) and the 1872 *Le Ruisseau* (*The Stream*). The line 'M. Vollard et Cézanne' repeats the title of the portrait and refers to his book on Cézanne, stressing the significance of this relationship for artist and dealer, and now, for artist and writer. The shift in roles from dealer to writer to some extent parallels Stein's own, and the following lines 'Histoires des bonnes./Histories des femmes' with the surreptitious reference to old wives tales ('histoires des bonnes femmes') both exercises the same

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<sup>48</sup> Gertrude Stein, 'M.Vollard et Cézanne', in Henry McBride, 'Art News and Comment', *New York Sun*, 10 October 1915, Fifth Section Special Feature Magazine, p.12. All references to Stein's portrait from this page.

kind of snobbery she later expresses about Picasso's poetry and wryly recognises the parallel with her own position.<sup>49</sup>

The poem speaks of the complexity of these roles and the relationships they engender. Vollard is a salesman, Stein a consumer: the phrase 'We came to give it away for very little/Less' uses the language of haggling, and the poem is secretly peppered with covert references to trade in the overuse of the preposition 'by', a homonym of 'buy'. These numerous references, 'I was pleased by a smile' 'By that time I was certain all in did it' 'By that time sun' 'By this I mean by this I mean am I in it' 'I was very much amused by something' 'By that time' and 'By staying' speak of the intrinsic function of the conversation and engage with the fact that art as commodity is the significant underlying logic of the cultural context in which Stein operates as salonniere, as investor and as writer. Perhaps the most telling construction is 'Please me by this', which emphasises the homonym by drawing it into a sentence which could be read very clearly as 'Please me: buy this' and thus gets to the heart of the complication. Vollard wants to sell his commodities, but he also wants them to be appreciated for a value other than cash, and, with the added complication that he is now selling himself because he has written a book on Cézanne, that appreciation now becomes much more personal. This short clause throws up important tensions in the notion of art as commodity: the relation between aesthetic value and monetary value, between valuing or 'pleasing' the artist as the appreciative audience for whom the work is produced and valuing the commodity as an investor driven by the profit motive.

Vollard's visit also calls upon Stein in her other position as a successful writer. Early in the text, Vollard seems to elicit Stein's advice about what to include in his publication. The lines:

Famous stories or stores.  
Famous stores or blinds.  
Famous sons or leaves.

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<sup>49</sup> See Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937; New York: Vintage, 1973), p.37: 'Your poetry . . . is more offensive than just bad poetry I do not know why it is but it just is, somebody who can really do something very well when he does something else which he cannot do and in which he cannot live it is particularly repellent'.



Famous leaves then

indicate the solicitation of her advice - this or that, what to include - and the final line here suggests her judgement on the suitability of the content. The repetition of 'famous' reflects the role of reputation and myth in the mutual promotion of Cézanne's work and Vollard's book. The line 'Famous stories or stores' implies both the need to construct 'stories' for this new art and these new artists in order to create the fame which will increase the value of the work, and Vollard's need to include famous stories and famous paintings (with 'sons or leaves' perhaps relating to a choice between two artworks for inclusion) in his biography of Cézanne in order for it to sell.

The complexity of these overlapping roles and the slippage of their positions is reflected in the final lines:

Please do be seated.

A watch.

Yes I have gotten a new form. That isn't the word. Yes I have gotten a new form. That isn't the word.

Please please.

Please be good.

That's the end of that.

The repeated pleading here indicates the interchangeability of their roles - each must please the other, each must be pleased by the other. Both are in the odd position of promoter and practitioner, engaged on either side of a business transaction but also themselves players on the scene and therefore engaged in the creation of the commodities for sale out of that practice and that promotion. Stein must please Vollard by admiring his wares and by supporting his creative endeavour in offering her advice as a writer. Vollard must please Stein by offering her the commodities she values and by himself producing a good piece of writing which makes her advice meaningful and successfully promotes the work she has acquired. Vollard must please Stein by enquiring about her writing and by seeking her expertise. The line 'Please be good', which is again unattributed, indicates the desire on all sides for the work to have value: the artworks, Vollard's biography, Stein's writing. This last is referenced in the longest line in the poem: 'Yes I have gotten a new form. That isn't the word. Yes, I have gotten a new form. That isn't the word'. Here, Stein seems to be telling Vollard, at the last moment before he leaves, of the developments in her own work in

a way which reflects her own need for recognition. The length of the line manifests a call for attention, the repetition conveys the desire to be heard, and the uncertainty of 'That isn't the word' elicits the engagement of the listener in the search for the definition of her new work - is it a shift in form, or some other quality which defines its newness? Here, Stein shifts her own role from reader to writer, swapping positions with Vollard so that he is, at the last, her audience.

Extending from Stein's activity as collector – what to buy, what to sell when, how to hang the pieces – the promotion and dissemination of her own writing and the work of others on the scene is an intrinsic aspect of Stein's authorship. Intervening in the institution of the market, staking a claim on its territory, Stein's portraits and the activity around them endeavour to make this modern work valuable. The portraits promote both her name and those of the artists whose work she is acquiring. Far from carving out a decommodified, disjunctive or rarefied space, she wants these works to be appreciated by the market in their own time.

The isolation of Stein which accompanies contemporary arguments for an avant-garde genealogy is just as problematic as the canonisation of modernist writers in the New Critical literary history. Stein makes no sense in isolation, and, rather than recuperating her as an important writer of and for her period, the narratives which have Stein as disjunctive and exceptional continue to write her out of modernism by isolating her. The portraits, viewed in their contexts, problematize these narratives by showing that, rather than resisting either an identity within the cultural landscape of her epoch or an engagement with the institutional apparatus in which works of art necessarily accrue meaning, Stein was actively seeking that identification, successfully constructing a modernist persona, and intervening in a direct and conscious way in the institutions which frame the artwork. The following chapter continues the investigation of the ways in which Stein engages with the whole complex of her contemporary cultural apparatus by considering her relationship to the academy, which is, as we have seen in Chapter 1, a key institution in the perceived institutionalisation of modernism.

## Chapter 3

### Stein in the Academy

This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.<sup>1</sup>

– T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', 1919

It is so very much more exciting and satisfactory if one can have contemporaries, if all one's contemporaries could be one's contemporaries.<sup>2</sup>

– Gertrude Stein, 'Composition as Explanation', 1926

#### Modernism's academic institutionalization

Chapter 2 has explored some of the ways in which Stein's work and the methods of its dissemination can be seen as more than marginal, dissident practices. I have argued that they are interventions in the formation of the modernist cultural scene and represent a series of conscious engagements with the art market. This chapter continues the examination of Stein's relationships to the institutions which the arguments for her exceptionalism claim she resists. I now turn to the academy, that other institution which is crucial to the arguments which see Stein as having escaped the reification of literary modernism into the establishment canon.

The narratives that claim Stein as the origin for a contemporary avant-garde very often identify the academic institutionalization of modernism as the main suppressor of the experimental radicalism of the pre-war era. This view of modernism's subdual is also largely accepted in modernism studies, as is evident in Allison Pease's assessment in the latest edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*:

Modernist critics formed the first generation of professionalised literary critics speaking from the institutional vantage point of established universities...At Cambridge, I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavis and William Empson, together with T.S. Eliot, created the intellectual basis that English Literature studies followed in Britain and its former colonies for the greater part of the twentieth century. Not only were they the first, Modernist critical practices were *the* formative practices of English literary criticism

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<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921) pp.42-53 (p.44). Further references to this essay are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Gertrude Stein, 'Composition as Explanation', in *Gertrude Stein: Selections* ed. by Joan Retallack pp.215-226 (p.217). Further references to this lecture are given after quotations in the text.

produced within the university...Leavis's own typically Modernist self-characterisation as in opposition to the academic establishment belies the fact that by the 1950s, if not before, Leavis *was* the new establishment'<sup>3</sup>

The story of modernism's academic institutionalisation which Pease's recent representation exemplifies has long been the basis of the arguments which situate Stein as both more consistently anti-establishment than the figures Pease lists, and a victim of exclusion from the institution of modernism they form. In these arguments, it is the 'academy' which is both a major instrument of the establishment Stein resists and a key agent in her exclusion. This is signified by the way in which, in the narratives outlined in Chapter 1, the New Critics consistently form the reference point for what is viewed as the final closing down of modernism's challenge to the establishment. In these arguments, the New Critical approach shaped literature studies in American colleges and followed the orthodoxy which was originated in British universities by T.S. Eliot and I.A. Richards. Thus, the New Critics, for them, signify the assimilation of modernism into those academies and its absorption by the 'establishment' into a tradition which has as its legacy the kind of writing and the kind of cultural landscape they critique, one in which, as Marjorie Perloff puts it 'Language poetry and other related avant-garde practices' are seen as 'aberrations from the true lyric impulse' (4).

Charles Bernstein's 1983 essay, 'Words and Pictures', for example, attributes what he sees as modernism's diminution into 'tradition-bound forms and decorous ideas' to 'Eliot's influence... and the rise of the New Criticism'.<sup>4</sup> When Bernstein says 'While a dominant practice in painting eventually followed in directions related to the work of [Kandinsky and Picasso], this is not as true for writing in respect to the work of Stein', he suggests Stein's exclusion from dominant practice.<sup>5</sup> When he describes 'the vapid intellectualisation of the academic verse of the period', he posits a modernist 'academic', turn led, for him, by T.S. Eliot, as the cause of this marginalisation of Stein's practice.<sup>6</sup> Bernstein therefore suggests that Stein was written out of the story of modernism in this form; that the more 'intellectual' and 'academic' values imposed

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<sup>3</sup> Allison Pease, 'Modernism and Mass Culture' in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* ed. Levenson 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (CUP 2011), pp.197-211, pp.201-202.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Bernstein, 'Words and Pictures', in *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984*, pp.114-165 (p.155).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Bernstein, 'The Academy in Peril: William Carlos Williams Meets the MLA', in *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984*, pp.244-252.

<sup>6</sup> Bernstein, 'Words and Pictures', pp.132-33.

on modernism validated practices and norms which meant that Stein's work was excluded from serious consideration.

The tradition and 'cultural baggage' Quartermain rejects in *Disjunctive Poetics* is also strongly associated with Eliot's perceived conservatism and with the reliance on knowledge passed down through formal education which Eliot seems to represent.<sup>7</sup> Quartermain calls Stein's work 'completely antiauthoritarian' because it 'radically undermines our notions of knowledge', and contrasts her work with Eliot's as the originating example of 'an oppositional poetics which embraces as energy source and material, the very subversion and deracination which so distressed writers like T.S. Eliot' (Quartermain, 23; 5). Quartermain also sets Eliot in opposition to the 'cultural breakdown' which he suggests the writers in the more experimental 'line' embrace, quoting 'Malcolm Cowley and Slater Brown's remark in a 1924 issue of *Broom* that "Eliot believes in tradition, form, everything dead."' He describes this remark as 'both poignant and urgent', and suggests that 'such cultural breakdown redefines ignorance as it redefines "education" and alters their value' (15). Here, "'tradition, form, everything dead'" are signifiers of the elitist forms of language and education which Quartermain sets against the vernacular and the more informal ways of learning which result in the kind of cultural freedom and desire for innovation he attributes to the modern immigrant population. Indeed, for Quartermain, the reliance on a cultural tradition and on learned forms opposes the mode of poetry he favours, which is able to 'enact immediacies of perception', the significance of which he clarifies early in his introduction:

The predilection for rules that the notion of masterpiece fosters separates the poem from the outside world, demands it conform to abstract criteria. In separating the work of art from the work of nature the artist separates the self from the work, and the work from the life: Art is seen as immutable, even absolute. Further, such a view fetishizes and commoditises the work of art, so that it becomes subject to possession, and the act of "understanding" the poem is identified with the comprehensive act of taking something in order to put it away. This is what the writers discussed in this book eschew, virtually at any cost' (7).

Quartermain's binary therefore equates formal education with tradition, form, imitation and with 'empowered cultural patterns', the elitism of the masterpiece and the removal of art from life, and opposes that with the poem which is 'transgressive of traditional and normative modes', 'true to its own history', 'multilinear',

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<sup>7</sup> In his discussion of the immigrant polylingualism which was transforming America during the modernist period, Quartermain reminds us that, 'the New Criticism, Anglophile as it was, [had] close ties ... with the Ivy League' (13).

‘heterogeneous’ and returns art to the praxis of life (9; 19; 8; 9). For Quartermain, as for the other critics, the legacy of Eliot’s formal, traditionalist modernism is what he calls the ‘collision’ in contemporary poetry between the ‘semantic singularity’ of the mainstream and the ‘multiplicity’ of experimental poetics (9).

Indeed, Bernstein argues that the ‘academic’ form of modernism has left a legacy in which, in his own period, the 1980s, those who are interested in “‘making it new”” are ‘displaced from the academy’.<sup>8</sup> Bernstein’s use of Pound’s phrase to describe the kind of practice he feels is rejected by the actual institutions of his own time reflects the belief that the academic institutionalisation of modernism has, since the New Criticism, suppressed the very innovation Pound’s edict had encouraged. It also anticipates Perloff’s *twenty-first Century* argument that modernism is an unfinished project different from the ‘orthodoxy’ which is, once again, represented by the New Critics. This is made clear in Perloff’s statement: ‘Of course, “Prufrock” was soon to become a celebrated modern poem, but the New Critical classic of the 1950s, when “Prufrock” was studied in college classrooms across the country, is not ours’ (Perloff, 27). This claim embodies the view that the universities (‘college classrooms’) dealt the death-blow to modernism’s avant-garde potential, re-configuring the avant-garde work as a ‘classic’ and – by ensuring Eliot’s poem is studied ‘across the country’ – as orthodoxy. Perloff’s assertion that the ‘classic’ ‘Prufrock’ of the New Critical approach is ‘not ours’, reflects the belief that in order to revivify the avant-garde modernism of the pre-war era, contemporary experimental writing has to somehow reach back to the pre-history of the work before its historical assimilation into the academy. Because Stein was, indeed, for so long excluded from scholarly accounts of modernism, her work can therefore be read as untainted by that compromise and, as a result, escape the deradicalized status of the ‘classic’ modernist text studied in the college classrooms of the 1950s.

These critical constructions of the academy and the concepts assigned to it – tradition, the classic, cultural elitism and a resistance to innovation – form the basis for the contrast between the modernism in which experimental poetry finds its heritage and the modernism it believes has created the conditions for that ‘tepid and unambitious Establishment poetry’ Perloff condemns. It is Eliot, in particular, who is posited again

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<sup>8</sup> Bernstein, ‘Words and Pictures’, p.155.

and again in opposition to Stein as the signifier of the establishment form of modernism she both resists and is oppressed by, and as the figure who stands behind and stands in for the new modernist academic institution. None of the histories I have discussed in Chapter 1, however, examine in any detail either Eliot's or Stein's understanding of or relation to the academy, whether it be, to use Allison Pease's words, the 'academic establishment' which these modernist writers and critics originally claimed to oppose, or the academy they 'created'. In order to explore how far it can be said that Stein represented a modernism resistant to the academy, and in order to ascertain how far Eliot is her antithesis in this regard, I want to try to gain a picture of both Eliot's and Stein's positions in relation to the academy and to the modernism which became 'academic'.

To focus this discussion, I will examine and contextualise two texts, one written by T.S. Eliot, and one written by Gertrude Stein, where the relationship between literary innovation and the academy is at stake. Eliot's 1919 essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' and Stein's 1926 lecture, 'Composition as Explanation', each attempt to set the terms for a new literary tradition and thus, I will argue, to engage in the imagining of a new discipline of literary studies. These two texts are also pertinent to the discussion because they both deal very explicitly with the concepts associated with the academy in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century arguments I have outlined: the nature and function of tradition, the concept of the classic, the designation of cultural value, and the relation of literary innovation to literary history.

### **Eliot and Stein: attitudes to the academy**

As a starting point, it is important to point out that, although Eliot and Stein are ascribed very different attitudes to the academy, the views they express about American colleges are in fact remarkably similar. Gail McDonald outlines Eliot's relationship to the university establishment and his rejection of a life in the academic institution in her book *Learning to Be Modern: Pound, Eliot and the American University*. This is exemplified by his conclusion in a 1915 letter to Isabella Gardner: "I felt the work at Harvard was deadening me", and his assertion to Conrad Aiken in December 1914 "As you know I hate university towns and university people".<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Gail McDonald, *Learning to be Modern: Pound, Eliot and the American University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.60; p.54. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Eliot's 'decision to remain outside the academy' well beyond the First World War suggests dissatisfaction with the limits of the type of academic discourse offered there (60). Indeed, he articulates this dissatisfaction in his characterisation of Harvard as a "deadening" place in which those who taught, such as his friend Shef, lost any sense of "wildness" or "liberty" (61). I will argue in this chapter that this ambivalence is reflected in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in that Eliot's essay, like the avant-garde manifestoes which form its context, represents a direct expression of resistance to a set of establishment views which offer a limited mode of discourse that serves only to stifle and deaden artistic production.

Like Eliot, Stein rejected the academy in her early life. She later claims she was, 'frankly, openly bored' at Radcliffe, and had a relationship to the academy which was often expressed in highly charged terms, ranging from discomfort and anxiety through resistance to open hostility.<sup>10</sup> A radical expression of this can be seen in a note she made whilst writing her first novel, *The Making of Americans* (completed in 1911). Framed in bizarrely colloquial terms – a kind of cowboy slang, the language of a literary gunslinger, an outlaw – the note represents an antagonistic vernacular resistant to the formal modes of the academic institution:

Eastern colleges too dam anxious to be safe. They needn't be so afraid it ain't so easy to be hurt as they seem to think least at least not by getting hit hard on the head. They needn't be so scared of any of us got any chance of real stuff in us just because we are made different ... They needn't be so afraid of their damn culture, it'd take more than a man like me to hurt it.<sup>11</sup>

Here, Stein presents herself as an alien outsider who is 'made different'. She transgresses the boundaries of gender ('a man like me') in a direct challenge to convention. By association, she conflates the academic institution with establishment norms. She characterises the college as a repository and bastion of legitimate culture, shoring itself up against the insurgent difference which challenges its authority. Her violent, aggressive language suggests a chaotic battlefield and presents her difference, and that of those who are like her, as a challenge to the fortresses of academia. Significantly, her attitude reflects a denial of the very relevance of the academy: the fortresses are not actually being stormed because, in fact, the real forces are

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<sup>10</sup> Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* (1933; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), p.90.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Ulla Dydo, *A Stein Reader*, p.1.



consolidating elsewhere. This seems to reflect the view that the culture of the academy is not under direct threat because it is simply obsolete. This does indeed suggest that Stein wants a literary practice which carves out a space outside the academy, but it is important to note that, rather than offering a different, more conciliatory position, Eliot expresses the very same desire.

Both Stein and Eliot, therefore, remove themselves from the college context and stay out of it, and for each of them this is because they experience these institutions as stifling artistic freedom and innovation. The critical stances on the academy documented here also reflect an equal impatience with the sameness of university life and ideas, perceiving them as places where the 'real' difference of the present is smoothed out and made 'safe'. It is significant that both Eliot and Stein are frustrated with these institutions because they deny access to the 'real': in both of these views one can detect the desire to meet modern experience in all its sharp reality, the sense that academia offers only a distant experience of contemporary life muffled by the dead hand of a complacent establishment culture. As I will show, Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' and Stein's 'Composition as Explanation' engage critically with this complacency, and on very similar terms, but they appear at different moments in the story of modernist literary production, and this means they act upon different contexts and, in doing so, provide different answers to the question of the relations between artistic production and the academy. What is also significant about these two texts in particular, therefore, is their place in those histories of the modernist academy.

Eliot's essay appears a year after the First World War, after the point at which, in Marjorie Perloff's argument, he had begun to repress his 'avant-garde' origins and move towards what was to become the conservatism of the New Critical academy. The essay was first published in the periodical *The Egoist*, and presents a theoretical system of the contemporary in which it is possible to examine his relations to the other theories and to the practices which were emerging around him. Eliot's attention to tradition is a response to the context of a fashion for manifestos which equate the academy with the tradition they oppose. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' must be viewed in relation to the provocative and anti-establishment stances taken by those overtly 'avant-garde' positionings which characterise the academy as the custodian of

the hidebound traditions which stifle innovation. I would argue that, although it takes a more conciliatory position, it is, like those manifestos, a critical response to the conservatism of his period and a challenge to received opinion and unexamined concepts, and therefore not straightforwardly an example of the ‘deference to traditional and external authority’ which Perloff ascribes to his post-First World War work (38).

Stein’s lecture, presented 7 years later, comes at a point when modernism, according to the arguments about its institutionalisation, has emerged from the early radical period and is setting the terms upon which it will become the new establishment.<sup>12</sup> The lecture was written as the result of an invitation, orchestrated by Edith Sitwell and Harold Acton, for Stein to speak at Oxford and Cambridge. It represents a complex response to the invitation to speak at these universities and to the university as such. In the lecture itself, Stein does indeed express an unequivocally negative stance on what she describes as ‘academic’ thinking. Delivered in the context of the Oxford and Cambridge lecture theatre, however, it nonetheless represents a direct engagement with the academy. And, as I will show, Oxford and Cambridge were institutions in which modernist literary practice was beginning to be recognised. Stein’s lecture reveals a keen awareness of that context and, as a response to the attention given to modernism in those universities, presents for them a theory of literary history which accepts the difference represented by contemporary innovation without deadening it. I will argue that, in this way, Stein proposes a philosophical and theoretical framework in which modernism can be sustained. In doing so, therefore, rather than rejecting academia as such, her model offers the basis for a new kind of academy which turns its face toward modernity and enables a meaningful attention to the contemporary.

I will also argue that Stein’s lecture, whilst overtly critical of academic thinking because it hands down traditional modes rather than responding to contemporary difference, is much closer to Eliot’s ostensibly pro-tradition hypothesis in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ than those arguments which oppose these two writers would suggest. The difference between Eliot and Stein as expressed in these two texts

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<sup>12</sup> See p.114 of this chapter for references and discussion.

in their contexts is not the difference of a culturally hidebound Eliot and an ahistorically disjunctive Stein, and their arguments are much closer in many respects than is suggested by the perceived dichotomy between the two writers. Indeed, Eliot's essay, rather than relying on received ideas, is an explicit challenge to establishment norms and 'external authority'. Moreover, my reading of Stein's lecture challenges the view that her work represents a resistant mode which stands outside literary history and therefore resists authority and established forms of knowledge. What I will suggest is that, rather than escaping literary history, it places modernist practice firmly in the context of that history because it sees the modernist emphasis on innovation itself as symptomatic of the material conditions of the early twentieth century, and thus explicitly historicises its own moment as the moment of modernism in 1926.

### **1919: the manifesto scene and 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *The Egoist***

Eliot's 1919 essay reflects his impatience with the deadening culture of academic and literary discourse, and this is in keeping with much of the theoretical discussion taking place in the periodicals and manifestos of the first two decades of the twentieth century. It appears in the context of the emergence and development of theoretical and critical texts alongside modernist practice, which takes place outside and explicitly in opposition to the idea of the 'academy'. In the battle for territory during the period before, during and after the First World War, essays and manifestos whose aim is to prepare the ground for the new forms of artistic and literary practice proliferate. These new forms, as they overtly reject tradition, simultaneously reject the 'academy' as the perceived repository of outdated traditional ideas. They act as a means through which to establish positions in what Jason Harding, in his essay 'Tradition and egoism: T.S. Eliot and *The Egoist*', calls 'the welter of avant-garde movements'.<sup>13</sup> William Carlos Williams's characterisation of this period: 'There had been a break somewhere, we were streaming through' speaks of the context of an open field in which authority has

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<sup>13</sup> Jason Harding, 'Tradition and Egoism: T.S. Eliot and *The Egoist*', in *TS Eliot and the Concept of Tradition*, ed. by Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) pp.90-103 (p.97).

dispersed and meaning is in flux.<sup>14</sup> This ‘welter’, is made up of the competing theories which rush in to fill the vacuum created by what is often expressed at the time as a loss of faith in the traditional order. Williams, who himself contributed to *The Egoist* when it was under Eliot’s editorship, also says of this moment, ‘the traditional order of things had indeed been breached’.<sup>15</sup> This period is an era of emergence, in which voices in little magazines, manifestos, poetry, and visual art compete to fill the vacuum and take the field of meaning by force. The overt iconoclasm of, for example, the Futurist and Vorticist movements relies heavily on the manifesto and the essay which explicitly claim an avant-garde position. Such proclamations carve out new principles for artistic practice and in doing so propose new theoretical positions in which the contemporary practice of art takes place. They also, crucially, attempt to control, indeed, to *form* the conditions of production and reception these works require in order to be accepted.

In order to proclaim their absolute difference, and their complete divorce from tradition, these emerging movements must provide a new notion of art, a new theory, in opposition to the establishment norms which the traditional academy, for them, exemplifies. The publication contexts for these attacks on academic institutions are, however, also highly significant for this project. This is exemplified by the English ‘Futurist Manifesto’, produced by Marinetti and Nevinson in 1914, which proclaims as its first principle, a ‘VITAL ENGLISH ART’ which is against ‘The worship of tradition and the conservatism of the Academies’.<sup>16</sup> This manifesto directly engages in a theoretical critique of tradition and the academy as manifestations of the same forces of conservatism, resistance to change and irrelevance to modern life. Because it is placed in the *Observer*, a British national newspaper, like the original ‘Founding and Manifesto of Futurism’, which was published by Marinetti on the front page of the Paris newspaper *Le Figaro* in 1909, the English manifesto also sets itself deliberately in a context outside academia. It is therefore both theoretically and literally in opposition to and outside the academy and the ‘tradition’ associated with it. Theory and production context become inextricably linked in the debunking of the academy, because the avant-garde attack on convention needs to claim both a

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<sup>14</sup> William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1951), p.138.

<sup>15</sup> Williams, p.146.

<sup>16</sup> F.T. Marinetti and C. R.W. Nevinson, ‘A Futurist Manifesto: Vital English Art’, *Observer*, 7 June 1914.

theoretical and a practical position from which to assert the difference of their expression of the new and stake a claim on the contemporary.

As I have suggested, Eliot's essay is produced in the context of these theoretical pronouncements, and, indeed, amongst the new production contexts which are being created or co-opted in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The essay was first published in two parts in the September and December 1919 editions of the individualist anarchist magazine *The Egoist* which had emerged from its feminist precursors *The Freewoman* and *The New Freewoman* in 1914. The essay is the culmination of ideas developed in his 'Reflections on Contemporary Poetry' which run through preceding issues, and in the context of that open field of debate outside established institutions amongst little magazines and in avant-garde manifestos. Eliot's essay therefore appears as an actor in a metaphorical battleground, in a struggle between competing positions played out across a changing cultural field. Jason Harding suggests that 'Eliot's doctrine of tradition attempted to discriminate among the incipient modernisms emerging from a welter of avant-garde movements and magazines'. In this context, of 'the difficult task of repossessing the fragments of a disintegrating "mind of Europe"', the development of Eliot's essay in *The Egoist* represents the consolidation of a position on the role and nature of poetry and of modernity itself in a situation of uncertainty, instability and flux, and in which the notion of a central authority has been replaced by a multivocal field of competing representations.<sup>17</sup>

In the project represented by Eliot's essay, the context of the struggle over meaning outside of and against established modes of expression and interpretation is clearly reflected. In a critique of unexamined habits of mind and language, representations of conventional meanings and modes of discourse around tradition are offered up and discredited just as they are in those 'avant-garde' manifestos and polemics which form its context. Although Eliot's register is less overtly iconoclastic, he is indeed explicitly attacking the establishment worldview in his critique of received attitudes to tradition. The opening line 'In English writing we seldom speak of tradition' is a criticism of the unexamined use of the term which is further developed in his

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<sup>17</sup> Harding, 'Tradition and Egoism', p.97.

references to 'approbative' uses of the adjective 'traditional', to 'tendency', and to 'prejudice', and in the underlying rhetoric of the continual use of the pronoun 'we' to suggest a generalised consensual position. This all expresses an appraisal of the general, establishment view, and represents this view as complacent and unexamined. It is significant, however, that what Eliot deplores is not the way in which tradition is actively used to support a set of principles, but rather the fact that the notion of tradition is not deployed meaningfully at all. He is critical of the vague and inexact way in which the term 'tradition' is used, characterising its use as 'vaguely approbative', and derides the way in which it is made 'agreeable', 'comfortable' and 'reassuring' (42). The power of Eliot's presentation of tradition is that it gives an impression of the semantic weakening of the term through its undisciplined and unexamined usage. He is simultaneously calling for and performing the examination of a category which has, in English writing, become meaningless.

As well as challenging the unexamined use of 'tradition' as a term, however, Eliot is critical of literary culture because the category of tradition is not used *enough*. The opening line 'In English writing we seldom speak of tradition' makes this point central from the outset. What is important is that the culture of 'English writing' has failed to take a position on tradition. It is not simply that the category is unexamined, it is that it is not utilised in the service of a set of declared principles. This is very much in line with the manifestos and essays engaged in the struggle to define theoretical frameworks for new and distinctive artistic practices outside and in opposition to existing forms of authority. Eliot was familiar with the range of manifestos which had emerged in the pre-war period, and I would argue that, rather than seeking authorisation from existing frames of reference and from sources of external authority as Perloff suggests, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' is a radical challenge to established views. Indeed, in a 1920 letter to Sidney Schiff, Eliot uses the aggressive language of the manifesto to describe this contribution to English letters as a 'distinct blow'.<sup>18</sup> 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' is an attempt to construct a coherent 'programme for the *metier* of poetry' (46) which will make a radical difference in the production and reception of literature.

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in McDonald, p.59.

It is true that Eliot does not reject tradition as such, but a further understanding of the essay in its context gives us an insight into the ways in which this is a radical rethinking of tradition akin to that seen elsewhere. Rather than seeking a turn – or a return – to established ideas, the essay engages directly with the *current* debates about those relations. The ideas which emerge in Eliot's 1919 essay have already been significant for much of the material in *The Egoist* during its 5 year existence from 1914, often with explicit reference to the very terms with which Eliot later engages in 1919 – the nature of tradition, the role of the artist and the issue of contemporaneity.

In the 15 July 1914 number of the magazine, Remy De Gourmont's 'Tradition and Other Things', presents a Nietzschean response to Williams's 'breach'. He suggests, like many do in this period, that the customary relationship between the present and the past has previously stifled contemporary forces. The attack on the established order centres on the academy, which he argues emphasises the past over the present and offers outdated models rather than encouraging innovation. He suggests that, in order to assert the significance of the present over the past, we need to reject the academy and the traditions it imposes. This is expressed in dramatic rhetoric: 'They bind me. They suffocate me. Far from drawing tighter the bonds of tradition we should release the brains which it binds. Bend your branches, great tree'.<sup>19</sup> The metaphor shows us an image of the human mind in bondage to the past: the struggle is in and for the minds of individual subjects. The tradition of the institutions, here, is a stifling force which compromises creative thought. It 'is a great power opposing the originality of writers'. In a series of often contradictory aphorisms which in themselves therefore challenge fixed ideas, he condemns 'School habits' and an understanding of tradition which 'savours too much of the fools who put it into your head' in favour of tradition as 'a choice not a fact', an individual relationship to the literature of the past in which 'You are, then you are also a tradition' (261; 262).

It is in this context that the possibility of a new relationship to the past emerges: if an individual is tradition, then the struggle over the field of meaning is in the minds of individuals. The existing academic institution, the 'tribe of professors', the 'teaching at the Sorbonne', the 'docility' engendered in 'the young men' who 'learn what is

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<sup>19</sup> Remy de Gourmont, 'Tradition and Other Things', *The Egoist*, 14 (July 15, 1914), 261-261 (p.262). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

taught them' is rendered obsolete (262). If individual choice governs the reader's or writer's relationship to the works of the past, then these institutions are irrelevant. Here, the new field of contest is over the human mind. Gail McDonald reminds us that Remy De Gourmont was for Eliot 'the perfect critic', but his views should not be conflated with Eliot's.<sup>20</sup> What is significant here is the intellectual context his declarations represent: a challenge to the authority and relevance of the institution, a desire for a new configuration of tradition and a reworking of the relationship to the past, and a focus on individual consciousness as the site of the struggle over meaning.

The debate represented in the *Egoist*, however, is also informed by the desire amongst some contributors to consolidate a position in opposition to Futurism and other radical movements, the desire to keep a relationship with the past which is not defined by antagonism.<sup>21</sup> Many of these writers do not wish to see contemporaneity as break or rupture, despite the strong condemnation of the old academies exemplified by De Gourmont. In the previous number of *The Egoist*, Huntly Carter's article 'The New Driving Force', an explicit attack on Futurism, stakes out a position amongst 'some of us who are not Futurists' and claims that, 'to futurise is to make a future by devitalising the eternal present'.<sup>22</sup> In his discussion, the present becomes a precious vessel which must be protected from 'immoderate and immoral use' and through which 'the way and motion of the eternal' passes (258). In suggesting that his 'continuous, unending present' has become, in Futurist discourse, 'a kind of fetish that besots the human soul', Carter articulates an anxiety about modernity and its detachment from the flux of time (257). He attempts to find a resolution which holds simultaneously the specificity of the present and its role in service to the 'eternal'. In Carter's argument, the present is made particular by virtue of its place in this flux, and the validity of action in the present is achieved through its representation of the eternal. His essay is a rejection of Futurism because Futurism does not engage the present in its relationship to the past. In Carter's essay, the paradigm of modernity, electricity, is used as an analogy. He argues that 'electricity is not new. It is, in fact, as old as the universe itself', and that 'what is new is the scientific conception of the

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<sup>20</sup> McDonald, p.58.

<sup>21</sup> See Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism* for a discussion of Anglo-American responses to Italian Futurism.

<sup>22</sup> Huntly Carter, 'The New Driving Force', *The Egoist*, 13 (July 1, 1914), pp.257-258, p.257. Further references are given after quotations in the text.



utility of electricity' (258). He privileges what is 'old' over what is 'new': the present is only ever a reworking of the past – a new composition of the same elements. Electricity, the prime example of the rapid and bewildering technological change which characterised the era, is here made safe, something already known, familiar and stable in its perpetuity.

This wariness about the radical position exemplified by Futurism is also clearly articulated by John Cournos in the January 1917 edition of *The Egoist*. Cournos offers a critique of Futurism and Vorticism which represents explicitly a context in which rival representations of art, time and meaning are struggled over. He vigorously condemns the two groups, critical of their timeliness in promoting and aestheticising violence, war, and aggressive masculinity, presenting them with mocking contempt as those 'whose masculomaniac spokesmen spoke glibly in their green-red-and-yellow becushioned boudoirs of "the glory of war" and "contempt for women" of the necessity of "draughts," "blasts" and "blizzards," of "maximum energy" and "dispersed energy" etc. etc'.<sup>23</sup> Later Cournos claims: 'The fact is, the artists, like the rest of the world, had hardly realised that the true exponents of modern art were the men on the German General Staff, holding periodical meetings at Potsdam'. His argument is that those artists who represent their own time 'too slavishly' relinquish critical distance and therefore offer nothing (6). The Futurists and Vorticists, who, he argues, simply reflect their time, have less agency and significance, in fact, than those who shape the world through action. If art is no different from life, then life is art and we are all artists: the greatest exponents are those who have the most force.

In his consideration of the role of the artist in relation to contemporary life, Cournos proposes Da Vinci as a model because he was 'a true Futurist, in that he forestalled modernity, and at the same time a great artist in that he reacted from it in his art with an oppositeness that was like the swing of a pendulum' (7). This suggests that 'great artists' need to take an explicit position on the 'now' in order to both distinguish themselves from the establishment (to 'react' against the normative assimilation of the modern) and to proclaim a particular relationship to reality (to 'forestall', to anticipate the nature of modernity and take a critical position rather than being swept along by

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<sup>23</sup> John Cournos, 'The Death of Futurism', *The Egoist*, 4: 1 (January 1917), 6-7 (p.6). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

it). Art, then, must be separate from life in order to sustain a critical position. It must take hold of modernity from a critical distance rather than passively reflecting it. Cournot's conclusion is a forceful assertion of the necessity of a distance between art and life, which he characterises as the necessity of a 'formula'. In order to take a critical position, the artist must offer theoretical mediation:

Great artists, 'spokesmen of their time', will always evolve individual formulae, without knuckling down too slavishly to life. After all, the Futurists themselves, by forming a group and adopting a formula based on the mechanical and industrial nature of our age, were drifting dangerously toward an academy on new lines (7).

This is a highly significant view for an understanding of the depth of the resistance to the academy in any form. For Cournot, art must be critical, and in order to be critical it must be separate from life – indeed, in order to be art it must be separate. But it must also be the work of individuals working to those 'individual formulae'. Art must occur in the context of individual endeavour and a personal, explicit 'formula' which represents the terms of that distance. In Cournot's configuration, the academy, that which must be avoided at all costs, is not a physical institution with a history, an official position, an established bureaucracy, and so on, but simply a group rather than an individual, and a group whose formula does not enable a critical distance from the modernity with which it engages.

Eliot's essay engages with these various positions on tradition and the outdated academy which is regarded as sustaining it by dealing directly with tradition as a concept. This provides the basis for a new and flexible theory of art which echoes Huntly Carter's desire for a modernity which resolves the past. Indeed, he endows the artist with that very specific role: of responding to the art of the past in order to express its cumulative meaning for the present. What Eliot also emphasises, however, like Cournot, is both the significance of the 'individual talent' and the requirement to present and declare a theoretical position *as such*: for a fully formulated theory of art in which the artist has an overtly acknowledged role. Indeed, this emphasis becomes an explicitly expressed aim toward the end of the first article. Eliot refers to the model he has proposed as a 'programme' and 'the doctrine' (46). Significantly, Eliot's essay is not a challenge to an existing set of principles – an existing theory – it is a challenge to the *absence* of theory. His concept of tradition is constructed against

claims of its contemporary emptiness, and this enables Eliot to develop a set of principles, to form a doctrine and to found a theoretical position.

What is crucial here is the overt nature of this declaration. Eliot is direct about the need to clarify terms and stake a claim on a declared position, but he is also open about the constructedness of that position. This is clear precisely because he is explicit about the status of the model as a 'doctrine' and a 'programme', because he defends his doctrine as something 'we persist in believing', and because he is aware of 'objection[s]' and of the fact that he is 'struggling to attack' a 'point of view' (47; 46; 50). The notion of tradition, openly examined, is explicitly reimagined, much in the same vein as Remy De Gourmont's polemic, as a way of choosing a position on the past and its relationship to the present. Eliot's reinvention, like De Gourmont's, offers a tradition which is fluid and acknowledges itself as a creative critical process as an alternative to the unquestioning adherence to the received systems of meaning represented by the academy. At this stage Eliot's formulation foregrounds the effort of choosing and arranging in order precisely to avoid the adherence to an invisible authorising system and the lack of self-awareness that this involves. The post-war Eliot, therefore, is still very much concerned with the project of making new systems of meaning rather than following established or authoritative ones.

Eliot's essay offers a coherent formulation which responds to his context and presents a consolidation of the range of positions articulated throughout *The Egoist*. His configuration is a careful balance between a resistance to the authority of the past in favour of an emphasis on the contemporary moment and the need to preserve a meaningful relationship to history. This can be understood in the context of a tension between the need to remain outside the established academy and the desire for an authoritative location from which a new aesthetic sensibility can be established. This tension is articulated throughout the magazine in these preceding years as one between the desire for radical change, a sweeping away of the 'deadening' effects of established institutions, and the fear about what is associated with radicalism: namely, the overtly revolutionary positions represented by the self-proclaimed avant-garde movements which glorify war and rupture as forces for radical and total change. As Jason Harding argues, Eliot's essay does not want to identify with this extremism because 'the problem with extremist modernism was that it was "deficient in

tradition.”” The result of this is a delicate dialectic which holds at once a grasp of the particularity of the present in its difference and the simultaneous role of the present as a continuously culminating result of the past, of tradition; ‘a creative dialectic between individual talents and a tradition’.<sup>24</sup> The academic version of tradition is characterised, by Remy De Gourmont as much as by the Futurists, as an unquestioned and unquestioning adherence to habit and conservatism. Eliot’s explicit theoretical framework thus provides a stable alternative which, by declaring its position, rejects blind conformity and resists unquestioning adherence to an external authority not just in its theoretical content but in its very mode.

### **Stein versus Eliot: reassessing the dichotomy**

In June 1926, Stein directly addresses the issue of the relation of modern art to the academy in the lecture which she later entitled ‘Composition as Explanation’. Stein’s lecture, delivered at Cambridge and Oxford 7 years after Eliot’s essay was published in *The Egoist*, has many parallels with it, belying the arguments which posit Stein and Eliot on opposite poles. Significantly for the arguments which differentiate between Stein and Eliot in terms of their *modes* of engagement with establishment culture, the lecture is similar to the essay in this respect in particular. As Eliot does, Stein deals in abstract notions and in the nature of cultural consciousness, presenting a critique of contemporary discourse and unexamined attitudes to art and artistic production rather than directly challenging the institutions which may have constructed those attitudes. As Eliot parodies the complacent ‘we’, Stein emphasises the collective consensus in her repetitive use of her pronouns ‘everybody’ and ‘everyone’ to characterise the complacency of ‘the majority’ who are the ‘acceptors’ of received ideas about the meaning and value of a work of art. She also presents and critiques unexamined abstract categories just as Eliot does. His critique of ‘tradition’ as a flabby category is paralleled in Stein’s impatience with the ways in which the categories of the ‘classical’, and the ‘beautiful’ are deployed to close down thinking and dull or deaden responses to the work and therefore make the work itself ‘go dead’ (216; 217).

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<sup>24</sup> Harding, ‘Tradition and Egoism’, p.97.

Stein's representation of the 'classic' as an unexamined and meaningless category which serves to deaden meaning reinforces her location of herself in a critical position in relation to the establishment and its norms. This is remarkably similar to Eliot's representation of tradition, which he also uses to challenge a deadening establishment. Eliot's claim that, 'we seldom speak of tradition', but are more likely to speak of the 'traditional', with its 'comfortable reference to the reassuring science of archaeology' expresses the view that the problem with the term is that it is only used to reproduce and sustain fossilised academic opinions (42). Stein's view of the 'classic' occupies the same position for her critique of contemporary opinion. It is introduced early on, in the third paragraph: 'those who are creating the modern composition authentically are naturally only of importance when they are dead because by that time the modern composition having become past is classified and the description of it is classical' (216). In these lines the concept of the 'classical' is paralleled with the act of 'classification', a (to use Eliot's word) 'comfortable' process which puts the work safely into the past. Stein draws out the semantic echo between 'classical' and 'classification' and in doing so she ascribes to the classic the function of categorisation, the subsuming of the work of art into a taxonomic range of prepared meanings and significances. In this story of the classic the 'modern composition' has its moment of controversy, but then is accepted and, 'when the acceptance comes, by that acceptance the thing created becomes a classic'. The status of the classic is for Stein equivalent to the acceptance of the 'majority' who are 'indolent' (217). The designation of the classic marks the blind and unquestioning subsuming of the contemporary into the habituated categories which are prepared to receive it, and, again like Eliot's 'science of archaeology', with its connotations of ossified remains which belong in the past, it is this that makes the work 'go dead'.

Like Eliot, Stein wishes to find a way of receiving a work of art, and of creating a work of art, which does not fail under the equalising pressure of blind conformity, and which is able to act upon the cultural scene to form new meanings, rather than being acted upon by a set of conventions which stifle and deaden meaning. This problem is articulated by Stein in the idea that 'once the beauty is accepted the beauty never fails any one' (218). In being accepted, the meaning of the work of art reifies: it now occupies a fixed place, and will always have the same meaning and value. What the 'acceptors' see is simply the idea that the work is beautiful in a conventional sense.

No longer 'stimulating', or 'irritating', the work has lost its power to challenge convention. This is clear in Stein's contention that, 'the trouble is that when that first rate work of art becomes a classic because it is accepted the only thing that is important...is that it is so wonderfully beautiful'. Because the 'characteristic quality of a classic is that it is beautiful', the practice of classification is the practice of rendering an object beautiful. The conventional beauty of the object obscures its contemporary meaning and dilutes its impact. When a work is a classic it has been measured and understood in terms of an established ideal of beauty, and therefore can no longer be said to represent modernity in its difference. In arguing that, 'if everyone were not so indolent they would realise that beauty is beauty even when it is irritating and stimulating not only when it is accepted and a classic', Stein identifies a need for contemporary culture to see modernity in terms of that difference, to find another beauty which is not the measurement of a work of art against an eternal ideal (217).

Eliot's essay and Stein's lecture both present critiques of established paradigms. They identify the notions of tradition and the classic as concepts rather than referring to their use in particular schools of thought or in particular institutions. In conceptualising tradition and the classic, Eliot and Stein offer resistance to the conventional and unexamined. Importantly, both Eliot and Stein want to generate a firmer conceptual object so that the ideas can be used in meaningful ways. They both attempt to establish what is problematic about the way these terms are deployed and to expose the ways in which they are exploited. Both these texts, therefore, can be read as interventions which offer a fully worked out theory of the contemporary in order to critique the *absence* of a disciplined academic approach to literary history and to the reception of the contemporary literary work.

The theories presented by these two texts, far from representing a binary opposite of traditional versus modern which means that Eliot is in the academy and Stein is out, have much in common. Modernity as an issue is central for both of them, and this is bound up for both writers with the notion of innovation. For Eliot, the focus is on 'what happens when a new work of art is created' and 'what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity' (44). Stein considers the artist in 'the particular variety of creating his own time', is concerned with 'creating the modern composition authentically' and articulates the desire for a state

in which, 'all of one's contemporaries could be one's contemporaries' (216; 217). Both writers identify the driving force of their '*metier*' as a search for 'contemporaneity'. There is a critical focus on the 'now' as a theoretical difficulty calling for a resolution which is not offered by established attitudes and concepts: as a crisis or state of emergency which requires – and precipitates – radical change.

### **Eliot's 'conscious present' and Stein's 'continuous present'**

Eliot's essay formulates a dynamic relationship to the past which offers an alternative to the deadening tradition represented by the established academy. He resolves the problem of the present by constructing for it a dialectical relationship with the past, asserting that his reader should 'not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past' (45). This dialectic turns the artist's face to the past, and the present becomes a creative working out of what the artist sees there: 'the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show' (46). Thus, the 'conscious' experience of being in the present is a continual coming into an understanding of the past and what it means for the temporary culmination of the now. Following this logic, Eliot's argument is that one cannot be aware of the present beyond the kind of awareness which 'cannot show' itself. To show is to cause or allow to be seen; to exhibit, to display, or perform; to explain or make clear; to make known. In this way, the past, and so also the present, is not aware enough of itself to be able to see, display or make itself known. This crucial point is the element upon which Stein's and Eliot's arguments coincide: that, in general terms, the present cannot be grasped until it is in the past, and so the present cannot make itself known in its present moment.

In the first half of Stein's lecture, in which she deals with 'the history of the refused in the arts', the barrier to a full grasp of the present which is discussed in Eliot's theory is articulated in a much more abstract meditation on time and consciousness:

The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen (215).

In these complex lines, Stein problematises the present (what is ‘different from one time to another’) by characterising that difference as a difference in ‘what is seen’. The use of the passive voice in that repeated phrase ‘what is seen’ provides the key to Stein’s characterisation of modernity. Firstly, the repetition of the phrase and the emphasis on ideas associated with it directs the attention away from the material conditions which might characterise the present as different from the past. This is reduced to the form of a simple phrase ‘how everybody is doing everything’ relegated to the end of the first sentence and buried in a paragraph which is much more about what is seen and how things are seen. The movement in attention away from what might be the material content of the present and towards the act of seeing it is also emphasised by the absence of specificity about the things that are seen, which are denoted by empty pronouns such as ‘it’ ‘thing’ and, in this repeated phrase, ‘what’. The passive voice, however, means that the subject, who might be able to see the ‘it’ the ‘thing’ or the ‘what’, is also erased by Stein’s syntax. Rather than the emphasis therefore moving its location from the seen object to the seeing subject who does or does not grasp this materiality, the meaning of the sentence and the focus of the whole paragraph – and this is sustained throughout the text – is located in the *act* of seeing.

Stein’s grammatical formulation privileges the act of seeing over both the seeing subject and the seen object, and thus she collapses the distinction between the ‘what’ that is seen and the subject who sees it. In this way, the notion of ‘composition’ which is the central signifier in the text takes on a whole new value because composition is here made equivalent to the act of seeing: it is what seeing ‘makes’, and, in a circularity which again erases that distinction between seer and seen, it also makes ‘what is seen’. To further elaborate the elision, Stein makes it unclear in the second sentence whether the phrase ‘it makes a composition’ refers to the ‘thing we are looking at’ or what is created by ‘those who describe it’. This ambiguity reveals the central point: that the experience of the present is so determined by the act of seeing and by the way things are seen that its material content is only ever grasped as a composition. It is so much mediated by ways of seeing that it is composed as it is seen. As Stein puts it: ‘The composition is the thing seen by every one living in the living they are doing, they are the composing of the composition that at the time they



are living in the composition of the time in which they are living' (218). It is here that Stein's discussion presents a more fully delineated parallel to Eliot's argument that the past 'cannot show' itself in its own time, but can only be seen from the vantage point of the present which looks back at it. In Stein's argument, this is true because it is impossible to step outside the process of composing the present in order to show that composition as composition. It is only by looking back that the composition can be identified.

Stein's argument therefore converges with Eliot's in the first part of her lecture. Like Eliot, she presents the view that we are always behind the times, arguing that between the present as it is composed in the act of seeing and the *consciousness* of the way that present is composed there is always a gap, a time-lag which means that the present can never fully comprehend how it sees itself. As in Eliot's hypothesis, the present can only be understood when it is in the past. This is articulated in Stein's assertion 'Those who are creating the modern composition authentically are naturally only of importance when they are dead because by that time the modern composition having become past is classified and the description of it is classical' (216). Stein's view is that the work of art which represents its time in its own time is rejected until what it represents is in the past and can then be comprehended. The present composition is so difficult to really see, that its representation, by the 'authentic' work of art, is always refused. To put it on Eliot's terms, the 'past's awareness of itself' which 'cannot show' is for Stein what 'refused' art represents. In Stein's argument, the present might show itself in art but its contemporaries cannot grasp it, therefore it, too, cannot be seen. Stein's and Eliot's arguments therefore coincide in the view that the conception of the present can never be comprehended until it is in the past.

### **Two theories of the contemporary**

The point at which Stein and Eliot diverge is significant, but not because the difference puts Stein outside the academy, not because it divorces her from Anglo-European culture and not because it removes her from literary history. This difference, I would argue, binds Stein into the literary history she theorises, legitimises her work, and posits it as the inheritance of a history of literary culture in a

competing theory of literary history intended as an intervention in the potential emergence of literary studies in the academy.

For Stein in 'Composition as Explanation', the role of art – and she uses art to mean writing as well as visual art, as Eliot does – is to provide a full awareness of the composition of the present as it happens; that is, to make us fully conscious of that composition in real time. The 'refused in the arts', what Stein calls 'authentic' art, therefore, *should* enable a sharp consciousness of the present as it is composed. For Stein, therefore, this 'authentic' work is not, as in Eliot's argument, the 'really new' work which enables a consciousness of the past as a cumulative manifestation in the present, but one which represents its own time in its own time: the present's consciousness of itself, which for Eliot is impossible. In Stein's argument, the grasp of the material content of contemporary life is determined by the way it is seen, and that, for her, is determined by the 'everyone' the 'everybody' and the 'majority': that is, by cultural consensus. As I have shown in my reading of her 1925 text 'Business in Baltimore', Stein believes consciousness is formed by enculturated systems of meaning. In 'Composition as Explanation', Stein reveals her belief about the role of 'authentic' art in this paradigm: it provides the conditions for the recognition of those systems of meaning and the ways in which they mediate every experience of the world. In a conscious 'seeing' of what is 'shown' the authentic work provides an understanding of the ways in which experience is composed. Reading 'Business in Baltimore' in this way reveals its function to show how a world is composed in the system of small-town mercantile capitalism. As Eliot's argument shows, however, it is only usually in retrospect that one can achieve a grasp of those systems of meaning. Because culture frames the very construction of the world, this cannot be grasped at the moment of 'seeing' and so the 'authentic' work of art which shows us what 'makes what is seen as it is seen' has thus far been refused in its own time.

Like Eliot, then, Stein argues that, in the history of the (to use Eliot's phrase), 'really new', or (to use Stein's) 'authentically' 'modern' work of art, the viewer is not able to see the work in the present because that viewer is unable to fully comprehend the truth it shows. Stein and Eliot express a common desire to render clear delineations of the relationship between past and present in an attempt to grasp the nature of the

‘now’. In order to address the difficulty of grasping the contemporary moment, however, both Eliot and Stein deal with the notion of the ‘now’ in different ways. Eliot sees the ‘conscious present’ as a consciousness of what has passed. The present, in his configuration, is a contemporary understanding of history, and so his contemporaneity is the development of the sacred wood of the past. It orders and modifies the ‘existing monuments’ which provide a stability, certainty and order of value and meaning which the unknown present, shown but not seen, does not. Stein, on the other hand, expresses the desire to fully know the present itself, to achieve a state in which ‘all of one’s contemporaries could be one’s contemporaries’. In ‘Composition as Explanation’ Stein wishes to hold on to the moment when the work of art ‘is still a thing irritating annoying stimulating’ before it is ‘accepted and a classic’, before it is made to ‘go dead’ (217).

In developing her theory of the contemporary, Stein incorporates into the talk a brief history of her own work, and in the middle section of the lecture she makes this claim:

So far then the progress of my conceptions was the natural progress entirely in accordance with my epoch as I am sure is to be quite easily realised if you think over the scene that was before us all from year to year (222).

Not only does Stein’s lecture represent a fully worked-out theory of the contemporary and a version of literary history to sustain it, her argument also provides the foundation for a literary history which can have her as its inheritor. It describes what Stein attempts to do with her writing, which she defines in the lecture as ‘the continuous present’, as the aim of contemporary art (220). Just as Eliot’s theory paves the way for his own practice of a contemporary writing, *The Waste Land*, which works itself out on a curation of literary history, so Stein, even more overtly, theorises a history which has her as its culmination. This theoretical divergence therefore nonetheless takes on a very similar function as action on the field of cultural production. ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ and ‘Composition as Explanation’ each provide a theoretical framework and a version of literary history, significant elements necessary to establish literary studies as an academic discipline, in order to validate and authorise their own literary practice and bind them firmly to a literary history for which their work is a meaningful outcome.

There *is* a distinction between Eliot and Stein, but it is not that Eliot is more engaged with establishment culture and Stein is more radically outside it. On the contrary, Stein's urgent desire that 'all one's contemporaries could be one's contemporaries' is a desire for a full meeting of contemporary art with the existing academic context, a radical transformation of culture in order that contemporary art can achieve its significance for 'everyone'. In this way, it makes much more sense to see Stein's work as an *intervention* into that culture rather than a separation from it or a bypassing of it in order to somehow achieve a more authentic relationship with 'life', which, to put it baldly, Stein does not believe we can have first-hand access to anyway. In this sense, the difference is not that Eliot's text assimilated modernism into the existing tradition and so paved the way for the new academic establishment whereas Stein disengaged herself from literary history and from tradition and so forever stands outside the academy. Indeed, Stein is as engaged with the project of cultural transformation as Eliot, and this is something which I think is clearly reflected if we examine the way in which this lecture actually engages with the existing cultural context of the academy.

### **1926: modernism, the academy and 'Composition as Explanation' at Oxford and Cambridge**

Stein's lecture is also as much a response to context as is Eliot's essay. In much modernism scholarship, the moments at which these two texts enter the public sphere signify distinctively different points in the development of literary modernism: the 1919 moment in which a dominant configuration of modernism is still emerging, and the 1926 period, by which time it has achieved legitimacy. The 1926 moment is characterised by Rod Rosenquist as the high point of 'high modernism', the end of the period during which 'the early revolutionary spirit was for the first time formalised and brought into cultural prominence'.<sup>25</sup> For Michael Levenson, this is the 'accession to cultural legitimacy'.<sup>26</sup> This cultural legitimacy was, in many arguments, largely achieved for literary modernism in its entry into the academy. Pound's assessment of Eliot as 'that rare thing among modern poets, a scholar' and Joyce's desire to 'keep

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<sup>25</sup> Rod Rosenquist, *Modernism, the Market and the Institution of the New* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.2.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.213.

the professors busy' are often used to suggest the overt nature of the modernist claim on academia as its preferred institution.<sup>27</sup> Rosenquist also points out that 'F.R Leavis proposed as early as 1926 to make the banned *Ulysses* a textbook for an unspecified undergraduate class'.<sup>28</sup> Lawrence Rainey characterises the relationship as the 'fateful association between modernism and the academy', and Eliot's critical theoretical texts are often seen as paving the way for modernist practice in the academic world.<sup>29</sup> Gail McDonald, for example, records the entry of *The Sacred Wood* into the university in the memoirs of an Oxford alumnus: 'Of the reception of the work at Oxford during his undergraduate years (1920-24), F.W. Bateson recalled "*The Sacred Wood* was almost our sacred book. It was Eliot the critic who prepared us to welcome Eliot the poet."<sup>30</sup> The very fact that Stein was encouraged to lecture at Oxford and Cambridge is also an indication that by 1926 modernism had become common currency inside the academic institution. This is further hinted at in the casually familiar mention in the review of her lecture by the student paper *The Oxford Magazine* of the opinions of two major modernist figures, 'Messrs. Clive Bell and Wyndham Lewis'.<sup>31</sup>

The site for Stein's lecture, at Cambridge and Oxford Universities respectively, is therefore highly significant. She enters the academic institution at the point at which modernism is beginning to gain recognition, an institution populated by students who are perhaps absorbing Eliot's ideas and academics who are on a small scale beginning to accept modernist 'masterworks'. Also significantly, according to the Oxford student papers, on a sweltering summer's day in June, the lecture hall was packed. Stein's lecture is a modernist event in an academic context in which modernism is all the rage.

The very excitement generated by Stein's visit, however, indicates that modernism is still perceived as radical and not by any means as representative of the establishment. The uncertain state of relations between modernism and the academy in 1926 is signified by that frisson surrounding Stein's visit, which, as I will show, dramatizes both the intense interest and the doubt, perhaps even the fear that modernism, as

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in McDonald, p.43; quoted in Rosenquist, p.7.

<sup>28</sup> Rosenquist, p.7.

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*, p.105.

<sup>30</sup> McDonald, p.59.

<sup>31</sup> Anonymous, 'Miss Gertrude Stein', *Oxford Magazine*, 10 June 1926, p.564.

perceived by students at the two universities, engenders. Indeed, this uncertainty suggests that modernism is, at this point, far from representing the new establishment. This tension is also indicated on the other side, in Stein's provocative stance, which in turn, rather than indicating a radical rejection of the academy, reflects a complex blend of resistance and fascination.

Stein's ostensible resistance is evident in the lecture itself in her characterisation of the academy:

Lord Grey remarked that when the generals before the war talked about the war they talked about it as a nineteenth century war although to be fought with twentieth century weapons. That is because war is a thing that decides how it is to be when it is to be done. It is prepared and to that degree it is like all academies it is not a thing made by being made it is a thing prepared (215).

Stein overtly critiques the established academy and what she characterises as academic thinking. Her use of Lord Grey's description of the First World War as an example of that which is academic presents the academy as offering a way of understanding the world which will always be out of date. Her argument parallels the disconnect between the technological reality of that war and the behindhand ('prepared') thinking of the past which framed it with the way in which modern art cannot be grasped by the academic concepts of the classical and the beautiful, also examples of 'prepared' thinking because they are ready-made and eternal categories. The war could not grasp its own modernity, just as the 'majority' refuses the authentically modern composition because it cannot recognize how it sees. The academy, like war, is 'a thing prepared' because it hands down the model of previous wars rather than offering a strategy which takes account of the present (which it cannot see). In presenting a closed system of meaning, something which is 'prepared', the academy, or what, like war, 'is academic', closes down meaning and assimilates what is different into a neutralized similitude which cannot account for the difference represented by the contemporary (215). For Stein, academic thinking assimilates works of art into a system of meaning that already exists. It is the thinking through which the work of art becomes 'a classic' and no longer 'irritating annoying stimulating'. Stein sees this systematic classification as the function of the academy.

Stein enters the academy in order to critique, and in order to provoke, and she is successful in doing so, as the student reviews will show us. It is in the nature of

provocation, however, that it reflects interest as well as critique, because it is also of course an attempt to goad or provide stimulus for action. Unlike the Stein of 1911, who thought that the American college was not the real field of battle, the Stein of 1926 engages directly with the British university in a way which, I would argue, reflects a desire, however nebulous, to transform it rather than to either destroy or ignore it. In the very act of crossing into that space, Stein admits its significance. It is an overt performance which reflects her desire to signal and, indeed, to broadcast a position. Once again, the context of its enactment is therefore all-important. The meanings it conveys are not inherent to the text in the way Quartermain and those other readings suggest: its meaning is bound up with its activity as performance. Stein may critique academic thinking, but her performance, situated as it is in the university itself, is an engagement with it. She is entering the fray, and in doing so she expresses the desire to transform, to influence the academy rather than to reject it. The reception of her lecture in the academy itself is therefore crucial in an understanding of its impact.

‘Composition as Explanation’ which was then entitled simply ‘An Address’, was delivered on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1926, and was responded to directly in the student papers and magazines for that week. At Cambridge, it was reviewed in *The Granta*, and at Oxford, *The Isis*, *The Oxford Magazine*, *The Oxford University Review*, and *The Cherwell*. The reviews are characterized markedly by admissions of a lack of understanding. In *The Granta*, this is expressed in the assertion that ‘she merely states what are to her facts; and to make these facts more difficult she has couched them in her personal idiom, which is very hard to understand’; *The Isis* refers to ‘the obscurer portions of her thesis’, and the reviewer admits that he ‘Frankly...could scarcely understand a quarter of what she said’; *The Oxford University Review* compares the experience to that which he ‘used to obtain as a child by pressing my knuckles hard against my eyes’; and *The Cherwell* states the view that, ‘the matter of the discourse was unintelligible to the ears of an ordinary mortal man’.<sup>32</sup> The drama of this unintelligibility is a significant aspect of the lecture’s performance, in that it articulates an understanding that this text offers a challenge to established ways of

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<sup>32</sup> C.U.M.C., ‘She Cam, She Saw, She Conquered’, *Granta May Week Double Number*, 12 June 1926, p.440; J.B.F., ‘Miss Gertrude Stein’, *Isis*, 9 June 1926, p.8; ‘It Confuses, It Shows...It Likes It as It Seems’, *Oxford University Review*, 10 June 1926, p.332; ‘Miss Stein’, *Cherwell*, 12 June 1926, p.248.

thinking. Rather than causing the reviewers to dismiss the lecture, it encourages them to feel inadequate, that they need to change something in their mode of engagement to grasp what it means. There is also a strong sense in these reviews that the very unintelligibility in itself is thrilling and moving. In these ways, it seems that the lecture offers a direct challenge to the individual minds in the room.

There is also a tendency to react to the lecture by overtly claiming a position on it. The most timid is *The Granta*, which describes Stein as ‘an enigmatic figure’, and presents the equivocal phrase, ‘What her value may be is unguessable’.<sup>33</sup> Others – in fact, the bulk of the reviews – respond with passionate advocacy couched in belligerent terms. *The Isis* enters the fray and takes her side against the ‘sheep’ who have ‘come there because they thought it would be correct and fashionable’, and dismisses Stein’s hecklers as ‘two stupid young men’ whose arguments are ‘prepubescent’.<sup>34</sup> *The Oxford Magazine* also takes her side on the imaginary battleground against the same hecklers’ ‘ignorance and bad manners’ but it also recognizes and defends her against the broader public opposition to her represented by ‘Messrs. Clive Bell and Wyndham Lewis’ who have presented her as ‘a freak and a humbug’.<sup>35</sup> *The Oxford University Review* defends her from ‘the ranks of the highbrows’, who ‘were at first inclined to laugh at her’ and attacks the hecklers in a prolonged rhetorical diatribe.<sup>36</sup> In a longer review the following week, *The Oxford Magazine* thinks that she is ‘as important as she is neglected’.<sup>37</sup> The language of battle, struggle and conflict is deployed throughout many of the reviews: in *The Isis*, ‘battled’, and ‘defeated’, and *The Oxford University Review* describes an ‘advance into the enemy’s territory’. The event appears to have engendered the feeling that there is a battle over ideas, forms and meanings around which positions must be established. This is not simply to say that Stein is a controversial figure: what she awakens in the audience is the recognition that art, theory and ideology still need to be struggled over, and that forms, modes of expression and meanings are being put under pressure in a way that is still new and unresolved.

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<sup>33</sup> *Granta*, p.440.

<sup>34</sup> *Isis*, p.8.

<sup>35</sup> *Oxford Magazine*, p.564.

<sup>36</sup> *Oxford University Review*, p.332.

<sup>37</sup> Gilbert Armitage, ‘A Word on Gertrude Stein’, *Oxford Magazine*, 17 June 1926, p.584.



The lecture also functions as an event which engenders in the audience a profound communion with the present moment. This is acknowledged in various ways in the reviews. JBF in *The Isis* admits that although he could not understand much of what she was saying, ‘I could understand the motive that made her say it, and throughout her lecture I kept on thinking that, if only I could be allowed to read instead of listen, I could catch at least a little of that amazing driving force’.<sup>38</sup> The language here suggests an engagement with the present in its movement, both in the desire to arrest time (‘if only’, the repeated use of the modal ‘I could’, and the frustrated desire to ‘catch’) and in the exhilarating force of its forward movement (‘the motive that made her say it’; ‘I kept on thinking’; ‘amazing driving force’). The review in *The Oxford Magazine* describes the lecture as an ‘experience’, and *The Oxford University Review*, in language which once again reveals a heightened awareness of the present moment, declares, ‘the striving for the continuous present held us all the afternoon’. Like JFB in *The Isis*, this reviewer reflects an intense forward motion (‘striving’) and a simultaneous contradictory experience of being arrested in direct contact with the present (‘held us’).<sup>39</sup>

The reviews reflect a bewildering sense of experiencing something only ‘knowable’ at its moment. As well as being met with a heroic exhilaration, however, this is also responded to with a struggle to assimilate often manifested as a desire to fall back on habit and on the known, the set of established conventions and constructions. Significantly, Stein herself is often represented in conventional terms which directly belie the nature and force of her address. *The Isis* calls her ‘this delightful old lady’, and the reviewer of *The Cherwell* – who couldn’t get into the lecture room and makes do with ‘looking in at the window from without’ – interprets the glimpse he has of her as ‘little more than a lace collar, which was reminiscent of those Eminent Victorians’.<sup>40</sup> Both reveal a strong desire to associate the experience with what is known and expected: Stein, born in 1874 and unmarried, is an elderly spinster. *The Oxford University Review*, in particular, seems to allay the shock of this experience by resorting to language, structures and images which refer to what is known, conventional and comfortable. The representation of Stein’s defence against a heckler

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<sup>38</sup> *Isis*, p.8.

<sup>39</sup> *Oxford Magazine*, 10 June, p.564; *Oxford University Review*, p.332.

<sup>40</sup> *Isis*, p.8; *Cherwell*, p.248.

uses familiar terms: he is 'rebuked by that decision and assurance which one so often finds in maiden ladies'. The image of the maiden aunt and the comfortable, well-worn authority of the rebuke suggest an experience which is recognisable and assimilable. What is also interesting in this review, however, is the frequency of references which are suggestive of childhood: the maiden lady rebuking the naughty boy; the memory the reviewer has of 'pressing my knuckles hard against my eyes' 'as a child'; the reference to the complaint which 'has had attractions for most of us since childhood'; the reporting of a heckler's 'advance...on the conception of children'; and the childlike, public-schoolboy rhetoric of 'evidently he has not tried unripe gooseberries'.<sup>41</sup> It is almost as if the reviewer has been reduced to the status of a child by the experience, and now finds himself vulnerable, falling back on schoolboy ideas and comforting images.

These common aspects expressed in the student magazines – a lack of 'understanding' of Stein's lecture and yet the desire to defend her, the language of struggle and conflict, the intense feeling of the present, even the fear and anxiety it engenders – indicate the feeling that something profoundly meaningful and convincing has happened, but that this is something which cannot be named or understood in ready-made terms. This provides a significant insight into the performative possibility of Stein's text. Just as she seems to intend, the lecture begins to achieve its transformative function – it encourages its 'academic' audience to change the way they *think*.

### **Stein and Eliot: writing histories**

The reception of Stein's lecture suggests an important experience which has a profound effect on its audience. The title of the lecture (on publication), 'Composition as Explanation', presents us with a key to its nature: its explanation is its composition in that it performs its ideas. The lecture remains, like the authentically modern work of art Stein says is rejected, 'irritating annoying stimulating' as the student reviews indicate: it is the conscious enactment of time passing – of the present. Somewhere around the mid-point, the lecture signifies the 'continuous present' as 'beginning

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<sup>41</sup> *Oxford University Review*, p.332.

again and again', and the lecture itself does begin again and again, composing the process of 'beginning again and again' (218). In saying, Stein creates and grasps simultaneously, and draws attention to this process, and so in enacting the formal presentation of the present, Stein forces her audience to experience the present. The lecture is indeed a direct action on the minds of her audience. This is highly significant. Firstly, it means Stein's lecture is concerned with the possibility of a transformation of the academy, in the way it offers a new conceptual frame and a new literary history to validate the contemporary artwork, and in the way it wants to do direct work on the minds of its academic audience. Secondly, it reflects and elaborates the crucial difference between the models of literary history offered by Eliot and Stein which is initially signified in Stein's desire that 'all one's contemporaries could be one's contemporaries' as a desire for a full meeting of contemporary art with the existing cultural context, a transformation of culture in order that contemporary art can achieve its significance for 'everyone'.

It is this difference between Eliot's essay and Stein's lecture which is the most profound. It is also of great significance for those arguments, outlined in Chapter 1, which see Stein either as detached from her immediate cultural context or as existing in a permanently resistant relation to the history which unfolded around her. These arguments have her left behind in a time which never had its fruition and which waits to be recuperated to evolve its true meaning in the twenty-first century. This detachment from or resistance to history is belied in Stein's lecture, and this is clearly revealed if we examine more closely the difference between the historical models with which Eliot and Stein work. This is bound up with the contrast I have already drawn, between Stein's view that the 'modern' work of art shows its contemporary audience how it sees the present and Eliot's idea that the 'really new' work curates the past to illuminate contemporary life as a culmination of that past. In elaborating these theories, their arguments take more significantly divergent paths, locating Eliot in a historical space detached from his context, and engaging Stein in direct contact with history as it moves.

In Eliot's model, the key metaphor and its related ideas provides a conception of the new work of art which enables the contemporary to be different whilst sustaining a consistency and unification with the past:

The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new (44).

This is Harding's 'delicate dialectic', and it reflects the consolidation of a position for Eliot which reconciles the various strands and tensions in its immediate milieu. What happens here, however, is that the reconciliation of those elements results in a version of novelty which, paradoxically, is not new. Innovation in this conceptualisation is an eternally recurring process, and this is affirmed in his assertion that the work which conformed too much to the past 'would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art' (45). His attempt to establish a 'new' institution which has also always been is a reaction to his era's very specific material conditions. He claims art as an autonomous realm which can never escape from itself in a hermetically sealed imaginary institution which cannot be ruptured. It becomes eternal again, a return to the classical conception of eternal beauty. In presenting a closed system that assimilates works of art which threaten to destabilize the relationship to the past, Eliot prepares the way for his own work. In doing so, the system he creates functions as a way of neutralizing the difference and challenge his own poetry represents. Innovation *becomes* tradition.

'Tradition and the Individual Talent' therefore denies modernism the force of its historical specificity by positing an ahistorical situation which deals with time through the same eternally recurring process and is therefore 'outside' time. Stein, on the other hand, historicises very precisely her own moment, to the point of the precise moment in which she speaks, and she draws out of this a profound inference for literary history. This is revealed most forcefully towards the end of the talk. Stein argues that, rather than remaining in the situation which she has described throughout the lecture, in which the authentically contemporary work is refused by its contemporaries, the current modern consciousness has now been brought up to date with itself and is uniquely able to see what contemporary art shows to it. Her argument is that the modern consciousness is up to date with itself because of the impact of the First World War. She asserts that 'because of the academic thing known as war having been forced to become contemporary made every one not only contemporary in

thought but contemporary in self-consciousness made every one contemporary with the modern composition' (224). In Stein's argument, the war has made humanity keenly aware of its own modernity because 'twentieth-century weapons' met the nineteenth-century consciousness, and so, by the end of the war, 'everyone' has been 'forced to become contemporary' (215). The cognitive dissonance engendered in the meeting of 'twentieth-century weapons' with nineteenth-century thinking, in Stein's argument, has forced human consciousness to see what is shown to it, to become 'contemporary in self-consciousness'. The consciousness of the present moment which it is the lecture's function to create is therefore also its subject. Stein is telling her audience that they *have* been brought up to date, and the time-lag which means the modern composition has thus far been refused in its own time is now collapsed.

It is in the distinction between the ways in which they view the role of art in relation to their different conceptions of the present that Stein and Eliot diverge, and it is here that the role and function of the academy is in dispute. An academy founded on Eliot's theory of tradition would become the repository of the works and ideas of the past and the place in which new works can be assimilated in order to modify 'the existing monuments'. Gail McDonald's discussion of the reception in British universities of Eliot's *The Sacred Wood* suggests that it did indeed begin to shape the established academy, and there is certainly and unequivocally a long legacy which stems from 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. Not only was Eliot's theoretical representation of the nature and role of poetry and the poet influential, McDonald argues, it was designed explicitly to shape the academy in order to legitimise his work and to prepare the way for its reception – to create a position from which his poetry would be authorised. The danger of this, from the perspective of Stein's argument, is that it enables the work of art to be 'classified'. In the terms of Stein's lecture, Eliot's essay is 'a thing prepared' and, in preparing the way for the shock of the new in his work, the essay 'makes it go dead'. Indeed, it could be argued that Eliot's essay succeeds in creating the formula for a group, the very thing Cournos is anxious about in 1917. Under pressure to assign his position authority in the context of a theoretical, artistic and pedagogical battleground, he presents this system as an eternal one, a set of relationships which have always pertained.

In contrast, Stein's assertion that 'at present composition is time that is the reason that at present the time-sense is troubling that is the reason why at present the time-sense in the composition is the composition that is making what there is in composition' (225-226) has a critical implication which identifies what Stein thinks of as authentic art with an art we might call 'modernism'. The art Stein sees as authentic has as its content a consciousness of modernity, and that is why the 'composition' of her own time is fixated on the awareness of its own modernity, on what is *new*. In other words, in Stein's contemporary moment, 'composition is time': modern consciousness and the authentic art which represents it are preoccupied with the consciousness of the present, with modernity.

This is highly significant because, in recognising the emphasis on the contemporary as a historically specific phenomenon, Stein's argument historicises Eliot's emphasis on contemporaneity as the significant factor in determining the value of a literary work. The crucial move Stein's argument makes therefore also historicises the category which Eliot's argument has made general. In terms of Stein's historical account, Eliot has only seen newness as the defining feature of a work of art because he is in a moment when this has become the case, not because this has always been the case. Eliot, in suggesting that art has *always* been preoccupied with innovation, creates a closed system in which the emphasis on newness is the eternally defining function of the work of art ('it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art'). In Eliot's paradigm, the emphasis on innovation, which for Stein is a specific phenomenon of her moment, is dehistoricised (45). Eliot's doctrine of newness paradoxically denies the possibility of innovation because innovation becomes normative and therefore is no longer new. Read through Stein's theory, this does not allow a grasp of what is different about the present because the closed system and the absolute category deny the historical specificity of that emphasis on the new. Stein's critique of the history of the refused in the arts is a critique of a theory such as this which, like the theories of the classic and the beautiful, judges the literary work against criteria which cannot comprehend its historical specificity.

What Stein is suggesting, therefore, is that at this moment in history the idea of modernity has become the defining matter of art. The lecture and its performance both show us and tell us very forcefully that Stein neither works in a historical vacuum nor

tries to create one. On the contrary, the function of the lecture is to exemplify a literary history which has culminated in her present in an art for which, as distinct from the work of the past, a self-consciousness about historical specificity determines its form, content and function.

Linda Voris, in a 1998 article on Stein's lecture, suggests that

The public lectures and experimental compositions are very different texts in their claims and style: in its experiments with the relation of examples and precepts, 'An Elucidation', for instance, is an experimental text much more faithful in its working articulation of Stein's anti-substitutive theory of explanation than her lecture, 'Composition as Explanation', where composition cannot entirely replace explanation because Stein has to use her own work as examples.<sup>42</sup>

I would argue, however, that Stein's discussion of her own work is compositionally part of the explanation she puts forward. Stein's reference to her work represents the historical specificity she proposes in the lecture. If composition is explanation, then the formal decision to use herself as the prime example of her epoch in itself explains, firstly that she is being historically specific, secondly that the consciousness of the individual is bound to the consciousness of the epoch, and thirdly that as a consequence of this she cannot be general. Stein insists on the historical specificity of her moment, and the act of referring to her own work performs this insistence. Indeed, she does not use her own work as an *example* as such; rather, her work is presented as specific to itself, representing its own moment and its particular mode. She, in fact, traces the development of her work by revealing how it responds to the particular stimulus of its conditions. She must discuss her work in the lecture because the state of affairs she represents has not pertained at any other point. Thus, this element of her composition in itself forms the content of the lecture: the contemporary state is not an eternal state and cannot form the basis of a general category.

Stein presents the established academic thinking as a mode of conceptualisation which will always be out of date because it is 'a thing prepared' and presents a closed system of meaning which assimilates and in doing so neutralises what is different. What Stein's lecture offers to modernism is not a separate resistant sphere – which simply becomes another closed system to replace the one it deplores – but a keen

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<sup>42</sup> Linda Voris, 'Response', *Modernism/Modernity* 5: 1 (1998), 131-139 (p133).

awareness of itself as a historical phenomenon bound to the history of western consciousness she tells. What it offers to academia is a historical account of western literature which enables it to confront both the past and the present in their specificity without the deadening effect of the universal ahistorical category. When Stein enters the academy she is, in whatever equivocal form, also engaging in a battle over the literary history it might accept, and this is evidently communicated in its performance if we note the significance of the language of battle and struggle in all the student responses to it. Stein is therefore not aloof from the range of cultural practices, whether hegemonic or counter-hegemonic, which form the broad context for her work, nor is her work separate from the rest of modernism's complex 1926 scene, nor is it hermetic, arcane or exceptional. It is embedded in those contexts and represents a response to them and, in this example, as in many others, it is a manifest attempt to shape them. Indeed, the lecture represents a pivotal move in the struggle to determine the meaning and value of 'modernism' in the late 1920s. In the following chapter, I will show how Stein's talk initiates a significant conversation whose participants engage overtly with the concept and history of 'modernism' in a protracted wrangle over the figure of Gertrude Stein.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Stein and the Death of Modernism**

#### **The beginning and the end of ‘modernism’**

As discussed in Chapter 1, the claims for an avant-garde legacy out of early modernism tend to posit an aberrant Stein who stands outside history. In all of these arguments, Stein’s experimental work resists the institutionalisation of modernism accomplished by its definition as a concept and as a literary period. Stein provides the origin for an avant-garde that can deny the periodization of a linear historical account, and that can circumvent the phase which saw the congealing of modernism into an institution. In this way, Stein becomes the origin of a future which comes to pass in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century literature which these arguments valorise. This late avant-garde is derived out of Stein’s resistance to institutionalisation, a resistance which they see as inherent to her work. Further, Stein is exemplary of the early-twentieth-century avant-garde impulse but she is also exceptional because her work wrenches itself free from its historical time. In this hypothesis, Stein so radically decontextualized herself that she alone continues a line beyond history and so provides the basis for an alternative post-historical genealogy.

This anomalous Stein, I would argue, is an inherited figure. Rather than offering an alternative to counter what they see as the hegemonic literary history which excludes her, the contemporary arguments reiterate its logic by continuing to displace Stein from the history of modernism. I will show in this chapter that Stein’s original displacement from that history is not simply a function of her work itself in terms of its inherent difference – whether of disjunctiveness (Quartermain) or resistance to authoritative modes of meaning making (Perloff). I would argue that, instead, it is the result of a struggle over the meaning, history and future of early-twentieth-century art and literature that began in the late 1920s, and which is a continuation of the early century interventions on the cultural field, but with a new element in play which is shaped by this battle. The new component which begins to reconfigure the field in the later 1920s is an institution which is beginning to be called modernism; that is, a single defined movement with a canon and a literary history. These conditions had not

pertained before because a single movement had not been demarcated, because the field had been articulated in terms of the dynamics of diverse groups rather than by a canon, and because the early century work under discussion had generally been claimed by its producers to be without precedent, without a literary history. When the idea of a historical movement begins to emerge, the battle of position-taking becomes a struggle over relative positions plotted around the new institution. In a significant number of texts produced in 1926, 1927 and 1928, the battle over 'modernism' is manifested as a battle over the meaning, history and future of 'Gertrude Stein'. And that 'Gertrude Stein', I would argue, is, much like the new institution which comes into play, also constructed in its deployment on the field of forces.

The new positions I am identifying, those which chart the outline of a period and a movement and simultaneously delineate a 'Gertrude Stein', emerge in a conversation which occurs through a series of texts in the short period following Stein's lectures at Oxford and Cambridge. This conversation is a direct consequence of Stein's lecture and its publication in 1926 by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press, in which she offers her vision of a literary history for modernity.<sup>1</sup> This is significant because it shows that it is Stein herself who begins this debate about how the new art could be assimilated. As I have argued in Chapter 3, in 'Composition as Explanation', Stein contends that the new art should be allowed to transform the institutions in which it intervenes: the academy, the institutions of art and literature themselves, in fact the whole apparatus of cultural values, so that instead of becoming 'accepted and a classic' it can be 'irritating annoying stimulating' without being 'refused'. Thus, she herself imagines a movement with a history ('the history of the refused in the arts'), and she imagines a possible future for that movement in a cultural scene it has transformed and continues to transform.

The conversation begins in January 1927 when the *New Criterion* publishes an anonymous and generally favourable review of 'Composition as Explanation' in the 'Short Reviews' section of 'Books of the Quarter'.<sup>2</sup> Around the same time, the first edition of Wyndham Lewis's journal *The Enemy* prints Book 1 of what will become

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<sup>1</sup> Gertrude Stein *Composition as Explanation* (London: Hogarth Press, 1926).

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous, 'Composition as Explanation by Gertrude Stein' *The New Criterion*, 5: 1 (January 1927), p.162.

his monograph *Time and Western Man*, in which he unequivocally presents Stein as the element that should be excised from the contemporary scene.<sup>3</sup> Shortly after this, T.S. Eliot offers a damning review, in accord with Lewis, of ‘Composition as Explanation’ in *The Nation and Athenaeum*.<sup>4</sup> In the same year, three monographs appear in close succession: John Rodker’s *The Future of Futurism* (which Eliot reviews alongside ‘Composition as Explanation’ in *The Nation and Athenaeum*), Wyndham Lewis’s *Time and Western Man* itself, and Laura Riding and Robert Graves’s *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*.<sup>5</sup> These monographs all evoke and to varying degrees dismiss the figure of Stein as they seek to conceptualise the period they call either “‘revolution’” (Lewis), ‘Futurism’ (Rodker) or ‘modernism’ (Riding and Graves).<sup>6</sup> In the same year, and in the midst of this heated discussion about the future of literature and Stein’s place in it, Mina Loy delivers a speech at Natalie Barney’s salon in Paris.<sup>7</sup> Following a series of enthusiastic essays in *The New Criterion* through 1926 – under Eliot’s editorship – on the value of Stein’s work, Loy, in a contradictory move, gently sends Stein and with it the whole field of early-twentieth-century endeavour into the past. In 1928, Eliot writes an article in *The Dial* which rejects the notion of an early-twentieth-century revolutionary movement hypothesised in Lewis’s monograph and posits the arrival of the genius Ezra Pound, in opposition to the invalid practice of Stein, as the only meaningful event of this time.<sup>8</sup> A closer examination of this short period shows us that a discussion about Stein’s relevance is played out in a number of scholarly critical revisions as a substantial feature of their examination of the nature and significance of that early-twentieth-century activity.

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<sup>3</sup> Wyndham Lewis, ‘The Revolutionary Simpleton’, in *The Enemy*, 1 (January 1927); reprint (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited 1968), 25-192.

<sup>4</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘Charleston, Hey! Hey!’ *The Nation and Athenaeum*, 29 January 1927, Reviews section, p.595. This particular review has been endlessly quoted in discussions of Stein’s relations with Eliot and ‘establishment’ modernism, in particular by the twentieth and twenty-first-century arguments I am dealing with: See Quartermain, p.42, Perloff, p.45, Spahr p.18.

<sup>5</sup> John Rodker, *The Future of Futurism* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co) 1926. All references are to this edition. Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927): reprinted as *Time and Western Man*, ed. by Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1993). All references are to this reprint. Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1927): reprinted in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry and A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, ed. by Charles Mundy and Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002). All references are to this reprint.

<sup>6</sup> These terms are used throughout the texts. See for example Lewis, p.60, Rodker, p.2 and Riding and Graves, p.75.

<sup>7</sup> The text of this lecture is reproduced in Natalie Clifford Barney *Adventures of the Mind*, trans. by John Spalding Gattton (New York: New York University Press, 1992). All references are to this edition.

<sup>8</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘Isolated Superiority’, in *The Dial* 84: 1 (January 1928), 4-7.

These texts represent vectors in a conversation about the recent past and long term future of literature, and they all include Stein as a significant component of the recent literature under discussion.

The practices of the 1900s and 1910s, as we have seen, are not simply a number of theories or a series of texts; they are also a range of social practices and actions which intervene in and challenge the cultural field itself. Stein's work and the activity surrounding it are examples of those artistic and social practices. The fashioning of group identities, the construction of personae whose meaning depends upon those groups, and the exploratory and critical engagement with the institutions which provide a context for the production and reception of art and literature, are all significant aspects of that praxis. This conversation in the 1920s shows us how a series of new positions emerge which attempt to secure the outcome of those interventions and consolidate the challenges they offer. All these writers take a position outside the 'movement' as if standing ahead of it and looking back across a fixed temporal domain. The three monographs in particular propose competing theories about the nature and significance of the artistic changes of the early twentieth century as a totality, identifying the phenomenon as a revolution in cultural and artistic practice. Shifting from the explication of theory in manifesto form as a way of establishing a context for the production and validation of discrete experimental practices, and adopting the apparent standpoint of literary history, these monographs move toward a theoretical account of these practices as a whole – toward a unified concept. In doing so, the consolidations also begin to see this movement as a completed event, effectively consigning it to literary history. And in that process, as I will show in this chapter, they all isolate Stein as exemplary of the movement which has ended or must end.

An appraisal of the publication status of these texts provides an understanding of the 1920s as a transitional period in a broader move towards cultural legitimisation. Lewis's *Time and Western Man*, although a polemical and idiosyncratic work, is published by Chatto and Windus, an established house dating from 1855. Rodker's essay appears in the series *To-day and To-morrow*, which published speculative pieces by a range of authors and was produced by the established publisher Kegan Paul. Riding and Graves's *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* is published by Heinemann,

an imprint of the parent company Doubleday Doran, which by 1927 was the biggest publishing house in the English-speaking world.<sup>9</sup> Loy's essays on Stein appear in *The New Criterion* through 1926, which at this point is a significant vehicle for a range of writers, but does not command the kind of mass audience assumed for the monographs, and her speech is given to a small and exclusive audience at Natalie Barney's Paris salon in 1927. The *Nation and Athenaeum*, owned at this point by John Maynard Keynes, was a weekly newspaper which, with Leonard Woolf as literary editor from 1923 until 1930, often published reviews and articles by authors involved with the Hogarth Press. The range of publication contexts for these works indicates a movement towards legitimisation, with more established magazines and larger publishing houses beginning to replace the little magazine and the small press. Rodker's essay, Lewis's polemic and Riding and Graves's *Survey* in particular are aimed at a broad 'cultured' audience rather than the coterie or subscription. Yet, the small press and the little magazine are still important publication contexts in the latter half of the decade: although, for example, Riding and Graves's text emerges under the aegis of a vast international publishing enterprise, their own small Seizin Press is producing hand-printed texts out of their home – in Hammersmith and subsequently in a small village in Majorca – until 1937.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this press publishes Stein's *An Acquaintance with Description* in 1929.

The problems Stein had getting her work into print have been well documented.<sup>11</sup> In this moment, the mid to late 1920s, however, a number of her texts were published in a variety of contexts. In 1924, Ford Madox Ford's *Transatlantic Review* published excerpts from *The Making of Americans*, and, in 1925, a limited run of the full text was published by Robert McAlmon's Paris-based Contact Press.<sup>12</sup> In 1926, after the tour of Oxford and Cambridge, Stein's lecture was published by the Hogarth Press along with some examples of her work, and, in the same year, her text 'The Fifteenth of November' was printed in Eliot's *The New Criterion*. In 1928, *Useful Knowledge*, a selection of texts with a distinctly American theme, was published by the New York

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.randomhouse.com/doubleday/history/>.

<sup>10</sup> See Roger Burford Mason, 'The Seizin Press of Laura Riding and Robert Graves', *The Dalhousie Review* 68: 4 (Winter 1988/89), 402-405.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Ulla Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language that Rises*.

<sup>12</sup> A small press which also published, for example, work by James Joyce, William Carlos Williams, Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy, Ernest Hemingway and Mary Butts.

company Payson and Clarke.<sup>13</sup> What this shows is that, far from representing the very marginal practice of Ulla Dydo's description of her work ('she did not know how much resistance her work provoked by refusing the accepted ways') until the popularity of what Dydo calls her 'public' 1930s texts, Stein's work was in fact gaining credibility and acceptance in this moment in the mid-1920s.<sup>14</sup> This range also reflects the multifarious publication scene, and indicates again the complex relation between coterie cultures, the more established institutions, and what might be called the developing modernist institution being framed in the attempts to develop and sustain more stable publication contexts. Stein's place in this scene reveals the intricacies of the whole publication scene at this point; the fragility, the moves toward stability, and the uneven transition from the small press towards the less marginal publishing houses. It is at this point, however, that these 1920s writers engage in overt attempts to configure both Stein's work and the kind of authorship they take her to represent as a mistake: indeed, as the mistake of the movement *per se*.

The texts under discussion can therefore be seen to represent a transitional moment in the 'accession to cultural legitimacy' outlined by Levenson.<sup>15</sup> What I want to suggest in this chapter is that these revisions make their claims to legitimacy by reconstituting the products of a group culture, that is, of a range of collective projects to transform the cultural field, as a series of masterworks by individual creative geniuses. In these representations, the movement ended on or around 1927, leaving a series of isolated figures unbound either to each other or to any collective ideas about culture, art, the role of the artist or the nature of the engagement with the artwork. And this sets the terms upon which the figure of Gertrude Stein can be isolated as the example of the literary history which must be finished. Indeed, in many ways, the 'Stein' they dismiss is constituted in these critical terminations: these representations construct a

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<sup>13</sup> This American press might be thought of as somewhere between the small press and the larger publishing houses. Through the late 1920s it published around 30 titles, an esoteric range including Blaise Cendrars's *The African Saga*, crime and mystery novels (Dorothy L Sayers, Maurice Dekobra), works on art and architecture (Le Corbusier, Paul T Frankl) and other titles representing a range of interests such as *The diary of a Communist Undergraduate* by Nikolai Ognev. Many of the publications are translations from European writers into English for the American market. Sources: <https://books.bibliopolis.com>

[https://openlibrary.org/publishers/Payson\\_&\\_Clarke](https://openlibrary.org/publishers/Payson_&_Clarke).

<sup>14</sup> Dydo, *A Stein Reader* pp.3-4; p5.

<sup>15</sup> Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism*, p.213.

Stein who is a cypher for the illegitimate, the liminal and the heretical. In short, Stein becomes modernism's abject.

### **Stein and the 'plain reader'**

The critical studies written and published in 1927 by Rodker, Lewis and Riding and Graves possess strikingly similar foundational tropes in the construction of Stein as abject, but, before we turn to these tropes, it is important to consider why these writers felt the necessity to take their positions on Stein. A key motive for this necessity, I would argue, comes in the shape of what Riding and Graves call the 'plain reader': these monographs are positioned as guides for the 'general' reader, separate and distinct in form from the difficult masterworks with which they believe their audience is to some extent familiar.<sup>16</sup> They establish a register which is both critical and didactic, situating themselves as demystifying elucidations for a confused, ill-informed and misled reader. In line with the publication context of the large publishing house, the audience they construct is the general public, those who are not experts and not of the coterie, spectators rather than part of the scene. In Lewis's terms, they are the 'the general reader', or the 'Plain Man', and, for Rodker 'the popular mind'.<sup>17</sup> They are also expected by all of the writers to have read some of those difficult texts, to be engaged with contemporary literature, but baffled or alienated by it. In each of these monographs, it is Stein who stands in as the locus of the difficulty and mystification that the 'plain reader' is assumed to feel.

Although the 'plain reader' is expected to find the poetry difficult, to encounter, in the words of Riding and Graves, a 'breach' between their sensibility and 'the sophistications of advanced modern poetry', this audience is not quite the audience of the tabloid press, yet nor is it either the practitioners of 'advanced poetry' or the art 'establishment'.<sup>18</sup> In the *Survey*, the audience is figured as the man who will 'return to his newspapers and his Shakespeare' if the modernist project fails to engage him (5).

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<sup>16</sup> Riding and Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, p.5. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, p.xi; pxii; Rodker, *The Future of Futurism*, p.6. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis also uses the term 'advanced' to describe 'the only significant...contemporary literature'. See *Time and Western Man*, p22.

The reader Lewis imagines is the man who ‘knows more about Relativity physics than any layman has ever known about the newtonian cosmology’ (136-137). Educated and literate, this audience is able to take advantage of the availability of popular accounts of advances in human thought indicated by Lewis’s reference to the ‘enormous Relativity literature from which anyone who cares can acquaint himself with the main bearing of these theories’ (137). Indeed, these texts are themselves positioned as examples of this emerging genre, with Riding and Graves’s appeal to the ‘plain reader’s rights’, Lewis’s intention to ‘present my argument in the plainest manner that I could’, and in the publication of Rodker’s essay as one of a series on such diverse subjects as sport and leisure, the role of birth control and the future of the wireless (Riding and Graves, 5; Lewis, xix).<sup>19</sup> These texts, then, are layman’s guides to the difficult science of advanced poetry just as other guides offer the layman an insight into Einstein’s theories. Rodker exemplifies the position this audience occupies in his definition of Futurism as that which is ‘called revolutionary by the academies, incomprehensible by the man in the street’ (8). Rodker’s reader is placed outside these two positions as neither the art establishment nor the uncomprehending majority. Lewis takes a position with his reader as opposed to ‘the majority’ who live in ‘the world of cheap art, education and publicity, or else the feudal world of half their ordinary speech’ *and* as opposed to the ‘highly-intellectualised High-Bohemia’ (5; 47). The reader is expected to disdain the activities of the masses, exemplified in Rodker’s claim that ‘to-day, in the general slackening of all standards, truth, however much understood, has less moral force than it ever had’ because ‘the mass has no use for it’, but also to mistrust the over-intellectual and that which threatens the social order (23-24). Their audience is popular but not ‘mass’, intelligent but not ‘intellectual’, educated but not expert, and essentially conservative. This is perhaps the emergent and indeterminate middlebrow, and the uncertainty about its constitution certainly reflects this indeterminacy.<sup>20</sup> In all these accounts Stein occurs, in a series of contradictory figurings, as representative of on the one hand the ‘high-brow’ and on the other hand the ‘mass’ and the ‘slackening of standards’ (Riding and Graves, 5). As

<sup>19</sup> For example, v.25 is on *Sport and Leisure*; v.3 contains an essay ‘Birth Control and the State’ by C.P. Blacker; v. 12 contains the essay ‘Wireless Possibilities’ by A.M. Low.

<sup>20</sup> For discussions of the middlebrow audience, see for example Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows, 1920-1960*, ed. by Erica Brown and Mary Grover (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and Lise Jaillant, *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon: The Modern Library Series, 1917–1955* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014).



a set of negative values at work in the construction of this audience, Stein becomes embodied as everything it is not and everything it disdains or fears. The othering of Stein thus carves out the identity of the middlebrow audience.

Lewis chooses 'to open the discussion among books such as those of Proust or Joyce', because they 'have been widely read', and are 'popularly accessible', which suggests a reader of the most prominent contemporary works. His aim, however, to criticise 'the Time-mind' in order to clear up the 'particular conceptions upon the popular, the concrete plane', which this new writing has created, imagines a reader who has been misled by contemporary culture (xix). Lewis's popular audience has been duped by a conspiracy in which Stein is a central actor and fraud, the '*faux-naïf*', the 'sham' who is 'one of the most eminent writers of ...the highly-intellectualised High-Bohemia' and who, having contaminated Joyce with her 'habit of speech', 'romps along', 'hand-in-hand' with him 'at the head of the fashionable literary world' (49; 47; 50). This caricature places Stein at the forefront of this world, and Lewis's identification of the popular with the 'concrete' indicates a practical, 'real' reader who is in danger of being taken in by the abstract conceptions generated by Stein's work and the milieu it has produced. On the opening page of the preface, Lewis identifies his audience as the victims of contemporary thought, describing the public sphere as 'the innocent plane of popularization' (xviii). In Lewis's construction, Stein becomes a cypher for his anxiety that, having been taken in by a fraudulent spectacle, the public sphere will be *materially* changed by it, that the Steinian 'infection' has also contaminated that 'innocent plane', and that it is 'imposing its values upon the impressionable material of life' (xix).

Rodker conceives of a public bewildered by the new forms in his claim to address the 'confusion in the popular mind'. For him, this is created by a problem in the conceptualisation of history, demonstrated in the seeming contradiction in 'Futurism's' emphasis on the 'primitive and savage motifs' which he embodies as Stein's 'mantrams', and its simultaneous concern with the future rather than the past of art, and in the 'menace of continuity implied by the word' (6). In short, Rodker believes that in the 'popular mind' the concept of Futurism as such does not make sense. He, like the other critics, also evokes an audience with a general knowledge of contemporary literature, proposing to 'confine myself to Literature about which

everyone knows something' – for him, this is Cummings, Joyce, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov and Stein (14). Rodker conveys the belief that the 'popular' reader, the audience outside 'Futurism', has been thrown into bafflement and confusion because of the obfuscation of which Stein is the ultimate or absolute example which should now be excised. This is expressed in his call for his reader to find a way to accept each of those other difficult writers, but to 'turn from the ungrateful method of Miss Stein, who means words to be words only and to mean nothing but what she would have them mean' (85).

Riding and Graves, in their opening chapter 'Modernist Poetry and the Plain Reader's Rights' are concerned about the estrangement of the reader in the perceived 'divorce of advanced contemporary poetry from the common-sense standards of ordinary intelligence'. For Riding and Graves, 'advanced' poetry must develop a more straightforward and reciprocal relationship with this public. In the *Survey*, 'modernist poetry' is problematic because as a type of writing it resists a direct, a plain-spoken engagement with a broader audience who are not members of the exceptional coterie which produces it. Riding and Graves's critique is that 'such poetry seems to say: "Keep out. This is a private performance."' As in Lewis's representation, the problem is that it constructs an autocratic distance from the general reader in dictating the terms upon which it is to be understood, that, although 'even traditional poetry...has a tendency to withdraw itself from the plain reader', the modernism they define, because of its 'sophistications', 'seem[s] only to make the breach wider' (5).<sup>21</sup> In the *Survey*, as in *Time and Western Man*, the reader's mind must also be changed, but not in order to resist the effects of this kind of writing: rather it is in order to adapt to its strangeness. Initially presented as a defence of modernism, the didactic function in the *Survey* extends to a project to teach the reader how to appreciate modernist poetry. Riding and Graves also present Stein as exemplary, but for them it is ostensibly in order to form a defence of rather than an attack on her work. In the final chapter, Stein is ascribed the condition of ultimate modernism, and Riding and Graves criticise the general reader's unexamined response to modernist writing in their claim that Stein is misread. As they argue, 'Everybody being unable to understand her thought that [she

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<sup>21</sup> See also Lewis, p.xviii, 'a sort of mystical time-cult' and p.xix, 'I, at the outset, unmask the will that is behind the Time-Philosophy, by displaying it in the heart of the representative ferment produced by it'.

was]...trying hard to be original', when in fact, 'she was only divinely inspired in ordinariness' (139). The genuine project of modernism is thus exemplified by Stein, who looks like a fraud ('trying hard to be original'), who seems to be 'part of the game of high-brow baiting low-brow', but, who is, as in their defence of modernism in the opening chapter, in fact engaged in a sincere exercise which can be understood by the general reader if only they would put aside preconceptions and pay the right kind of attention (5). Stein is the exemplary modernist who arouses hostility and scepticism not because she is a fraud – as Lewis would have it – but because she has not been attended to with a serious critical rigour.

In this sense, then, the *Survey* itself is the solution to the problem: this text *is* the way in which modernism has to change in order to accommodate the 'plain' reader. The *Survey* represents a demystification, a moving out of the separate sphere it assumes 'advanced' poetry to occupy. It establishes the serious intent of the project and attempts to open it up for the 'reading public'. For Riding and Graves, the right to be given to the reader is the ability to understand and judge these apparently sealed and impermeable works, and as a corollary to this right the reader has a responsibility to embark on some significant intellectual modifications. Thus, 'the plain reader must make certain important alterations in his critical attitude' and accept 'that poetry obviously demands a more vigorous imaginative effort than the plain reader has been willing to apply to it' (5). Unlike in the other monographs, the reader is at first encouraged to enter into the project of modernism by engaging with Stein's strangeness and taking it as a sincere endeavour rather than as a fraud or a game – to become modernism's audience.

In all these texts, the implication is that the new art – for good or ill – has been largely understood and accepted by the cultured elite, but that it has yet to be properly grasped in the broader social sphere. Like the 1927 trial of Constantin Brancusi's 'Bird in Space', in which the Romanian sculptor's work was the subject of a US court case to determine, for customs purposes, whether it was a work of art or not, these monographs reflect both the significant presence of the new mode of art in the public domain and the continuing resistance to it. For these guides to contemporary literature, the narrative of modern shock is no longer convincing, and, like the trial,

which ultimately judged Brancusi's work to be officially designated as a work of art rather than a 'utensil', their move is towards the institutional acceptance of the literature they identify as revolutionary, futurist, or modernist.<sup>22</sup> In order to do so, these texts construct an audience which is decidedly modern. Lewis identifies his reader as, like him, distinct from 'the victorian mind' for whom the idea 'That there could be anything "beautiful" about machinery, or anything "romantic" about industry, was never so much as entertained' (3). Similarly, Riding and Graves distinguish themselves and their readers from 'the Victorian poet and his reader' who are bound by 'an agreement between them of a common, though not an original, sentiment', presupposing that this kind of relationship, because it is outdated, is no longer relevant to their modern reader (15). Rodker's certainty about his reader's sense of modernity is indicated in the plural pronouns of his appeal to that reader's excitement about modern technological innovations, characterised as the 'tremendous expansion which we feel the mechanical age has made flower in us' (58). Excited by the advancements of the modern world and consciously distinct from the Victorian figure of the past, this audience by these accounts seems, theoretically, ready to engage with contemporary 'advanced' literature.

The position taken by these texts is one of conciliation. For all of these writers, the spectacles and controversies have done their work: they have adjusted the relations and functions of art, and it what is now necessary is a coming to terms with these shifts. In order to end the controversy, and to make good those changes, the new status of art must now be assimilated into the broader public realm. The necessity of appealing to an educated general readership, these texts show us, is becoming more and more significant. In these attempts to now secure rather than alienate that broader audience, however, 'modernism' or 'Futurism' must move from the site of controversy and outrage. In their isolation of Stein, these appeals to that broader audience figure her as the extreme exemplar of that outrage, and thus, in their various

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<sup>22</sup>The 1927-1928 trial *Brancusi v United States* was brought by Edward Steichen, who co-owned the 291 gallery with Alfred Stieglitz. The trial was reported on by Henry Mc Bride in his column 'Modern Art', published in the January 1928 edition of *The Dial*, incidentally the same edition in which Eliot's article 'Isolated Superiority' appeared. For fuller details of the trial including a partial transcript, see Stephanie Giry's online article 'An Odd Bird' in *Legal Affairs Magazine*, September-October 2002, [http://www.legalaffairs.org/issues/September-October-2002/story\\_giry\\_sepoct2002.msp](http://www.legalaffairs.org/issues/September-October-2002/story_giry_sepoct2002.msp).

ways, ultimately use that figure of Stein to separate the other manifestations of the movement from controversy.

*The Survey of Modernist Poetry*, *Time and Western Man*, and *The Future of Futurism*, seek a middlebrow ‘modern’ audience whom they wish to alter. In these stories of the relation between modernism and the ‘public’, Stein figures as the point at which modernism and that public chafe against each other. Thus, she exemplifies the difficulty with modernism which is taken to be the experience of the ordinary reader they evoke, and she stands in for the plain reader’s experience of modernism as such. It is in the figure of Stein that these writers embody the resistance of that audience to it, and, in doing so they can form a totemic representation of everything they must relinquish in return for the sincere attention of this reader. Constructed as the high-priestess of modernist or futurist arcana, Stein is made – even, as we shall see, in *The Survey of Modernist Poetry* – to exemplify everything *this* audience does not or should not want out of it.

**Stein and the death of modernism: *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, *Time and Western Man* and *The Future of Futurism***

The critical enterprise of cultural intervention turns in this period to revisions of recent literary history which attempt to identify and end the story of a movement and look back at it as a phenomenon in the past. In consolidating those changes the writers feel have been wrought by the praxes of the early twentieth century, they mark the period off, constructing a finished narrative and, in doing so, pronouncing the death of modernism. The end of this period is achieved in the overt discrediting or historicising of the work of the group and in a turn to the figure of the individual author genius, which displaces or replaces the collective work which comprised the new works of art and the concomitant innovations on the field of production. This dialectical move that is at once identification and elimination is perhaps most marked and overt in the *Survey of Modernist Poetry*. For most of the book, Riding and Graves argue for ‘modernism’ and for the conceptual irrelevance of the author which, for them, is its basis, but in the final chapter they use the figure of Stein to radically review and ultimately renounce this position entirely.

Initially, as we have seen, they defend modernist works and call for a new relationship between reader and poem in which the reader must work seriously with a set of critical tools and knowledge of literary history to understand the ways in which the text makes its meaning. The formal features of the poem and its relationship to other literary works are the central concerns and, therefore, in this conception of the modernist poem, the text is an autonomous entity that can be judged according to objective criteria. Chapter 6 of the *Survey*, 'The Making of the Poem' begins thus:

A declaration of the independence of the poem naturally causes a change in the attitude of the poet towards himself. This does not mean that the poet ceases to be important; he merely acquires a new sense of privacy which his relation to the poem in the old regime made impossible. He shrinks from the strenuous publicity into which he might be dragged by the author-worship of traditional poetry or the abnormal sense of self-importance usually displayed in the official programmes of such dead movements as imagism (63).

This declaration of the autonomy of the text is firmly predicated upon the suppression of the author. After the completion of the poem the poet retreats into privacy which is enabled because in the act of creation the poet has exercised what they describe in the previous chapter as 'an enlightened withdrawal of the will' which allows the poem to have an 'independent form' (61). Riding and Graves call this the 'creative will', and ascribe to this will the ability to set the poem in motion and retreat from it. In a complex reconfiguring of genius, it is the act of making the poem and not the poet to which the quality of genius is assigned: the poetry which achieves the status of 'real poetry' is written by a poet who is able to 'behave with genius'. Genius, then, is the act of exercising the 'creative will' in which the experiences and intentions of the author yield to an 'experimental' approach which is neither the giving up of will nor the concentrated exertion of will, but 'a delicate and constantly alert state of expectancy directed towards the discovery of something of which some slight clue has been given' (60).

This relation of the author to the poem, for Riding and Graves, is what characterises 'modernist' poetry. The concept they identify here, exemplified in an Anglo-American canon including E.E. Cummings, T.S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, Marianne Moore and Edith Sitwell, is characterised by an idea of textual autonomy firmly bound to both authorial impersonality – the withdrawal of the writer's will –

and to the disappearance of the author when the poem is complete – the new privacy and the avoidance of publicity. The retreat of the author from the public sphere and from a significant personal relation to the poem performs an intensification of the significance of the poem as the product of an anonymous act of withdrawal and the diminution of the significance of the canonical author figure characterised by Riding and Graves as ‘the author-worship of traditional poetry’. This enables an engagement with the poem as a separate and distinct entity divorced from any notion of authorial intention. As we can see, initially, their argument supports modernism because it enables this kind of engagement and because it has genius as an activity rather than a person, with the canonical genius associated with author-worship belonging not to modernism but to a traditional poetry now out of date. In a complex and contradictory series of turns, however, in the final chapter these poets reject the movement wholesale. Having constructed a modernism they can defend, in the final analysis they invoke the figure of Gertrude Stein in order to turn unambiguously against it.

In the final chapter Riding and Graves explicitly announce the death of modernism, claiming in the opening paragraph:

It is now possible to reach a position where the modernist movement itself can be looked at with historical (as opposed to contemporary) sympathy as a stage in poetry that is to pass in turn, or may have already passed... As nothing can remain contemporary for very long, we were obliged to assume this position if our criticism was to stand before rather than behind its subject (129).

The statement ‘nothing can remain contemporary for very long’ parodies the modernist emphasis on the new and presents it as a dead end. In suggesting that it is over because it is no longer contemporary, Riding and Graves turn modernism against itself. The categorisation of the contemporary, which they argue is the founding principle of modernism, immediately sends it into the past. Their contention is that the poetry it demands is far too concerned with the question of what poetry is or should be at the moment it was written. The poem, therefore, can only ever be the expression of a theory about what ‘the *art* of poetry’ is at that instant. As they say later in the chapter ‘creation and critical judgement being made one act, a work has no future history with readers; it is ended when it is ended’ (131-132). Thus, the modernist poem is about itself, doing the work of criticism because its function is to express its own value and meaning in its contemporary moment in the history of poetry. At this late point in the monograph, they question the reliance of modernist poetry on the

‘objective’ measures of the historical value of the poem which they have supported through most of the text. The production and reception of modernist poetry, they argue, are governed by an autogenic theoretical taxonomy which reduces the poem to the expression of its ‘forced relation’ to the ‘historical period to which it accidentally belonged’ (132). For Riding and Graves, the modernism predicated upon a premise of autonomy and the concomitant irrelevance of the writer’s ‘personality’ has, by 1927, become impossible to sustain.

It is at this point that Stein is identified as the exemplar of these modernist theories in practice:

Gertrude Stein is perhaps the only artisan of language who has succeeded in practising scientific barbarism literally. Her words are primitive in the sense that they are bare, immobile, mathematically placed, abstract: so primitive indeed that the theorists of the new barbarism have repudiated her work as a romantic vulgar barbarism, expressing the personal crudeness of a mechanical age rather than a refined historical effort to restore a lost absolute to a community of co-ordinated poets (136).

Stein’s work is the ultimate example of the intensely context-determined nature of modernist meaning-making – the meaning which the poem derives from its position on the cultural scene, its relations to other cultural artefacts, and its expression of those relations – which Riding and Graves now seek to resist. Misread even by modernists, they argue, Stein presents modernism with a vision of itself from which it recoils in horror. Her method is the ultimate expression of modernism because it only means anything in the context of the modernist project. As they see it, this is the task of defining absolutely the contemporary moment as the set of historical relations, ‘mathematically placed’, which determine the act of writing in the present. The modernist work becomes a document which records that set of historical relations, and Stein’s work is the purest example of that recording process.

As Jean-Michel Rabaté puts it:

Graves and Riding, apparently intent on presenting modernism in its broadest sense, in fact attempt to bury it, to close off modernism as an active movement. In order to achieve this cunning sleight of hand, they have to identify the termination of modernism with what they see as its inception – namely, with the works of Gertrude Stein.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Jean-Michel Rabaté, *The Ghosts of Modernity*, p.188-190.



The way in which Riding and Graves bind Stein to the death of modernism elaborates their dialectic by exemplifying how she can be figured at once as everything that modernism achieved and everything which means it has failed – a dialectic which imagines a modernism whose function is to resolve itself out of existence, leaving an ‘embarrassed pause after an arduous and erudite stock-taking’ (132). Stein’s practice works out the end for modernism not because it ushers in an undesirable future for poetry, but because it has achieved the function of purifying poetry in order that it can be reactivated or re-originated. Graves and Riding’s descriptions of Stein’s work: ‘she used language automatically to record pure ultimate obviousness’ that she has succeeded in ‘purging it completely of its false experiences’ and that ‘these words have no history’, contend that Stein takes modernism to its logical conclusion by emptying language of meaning (139). For them, Stein’s work performs an absolute expression of modernism which clears history away by achieving such an excessive emphasis on time that it becomes a meaningless record of pure duration. And, particularly for Riding, who develops this theory further in her 1928 book *Contemporaries and Snobs*, poetry must begin again in the hands of the individual as opposed to the context of modernism, which for her is the context of collective meaning generated around abstract theoretical accounts of the function of art in modernity.<sup>24</sup> Her contradictory desire to turn Stein into an individual, however, creates the same effect, as we shall see, as the other revisions of the period. Taken out of context and treated as an isolated phenomenon, Stein’s work does indeed lose its meaning.

Lewis’s *Time and Western Man* reveals a similar preoccupation with the figure of the talented poet and the activity of writing real poetry stifled by a literary system which suppresses individual genius. Once again, the oppressiveness of the movement he delineates is exemplified by Stein’s practice. Lewis ascribes a revolutionary quality to early-twentieth-century art, which he defines as ‘a form of artistic expression that has attempted something definitely new; something that could not have come into existence in any age but this one’. As Riding and Graves eventually do, he explicitly separates the real innovations of the movement from the activity of the group and assigns the authentic revolutionary praxis to the individual. For Lewis, ‘Art of [the

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<sup>24</sup> Laura Riding, *Contemporaries and Snobs* (Garden City: Doubleday Doran & Company, 1928).

revolutionary] type is confined to a very small number of workers', and he wishes 'to mark this off distinctly from the much greater mass of work which...is in no way revolutionary'. Lewis's description of the contemporary art scene provides an image of the proliferation of groups and the fluorescence of minority cultures: 'The first thing that would be noticed by anyone entering the art world for the first time would be that it was discriminated into "movements" rather than into individuals'(24). Although Lewis wishes to have a modernism whose real value arises from the work of a few talented originals, rather than denying the group character of the revolution, he, like Riding, designates this character explicitly as its original defining feature. In Lewis's argument, the collective form must come to an end because 'The effect of that form of organisation, to start with, is, inevitably, to advertise the inferior artist at the expense of the better...Or else "the group" is more simply an organisation of nothing but inferior artists directed, sometimes by means of propaganda, against the *idea* of individual talent altogether' (25). The echo of Eliot's 1919 formulation reflects the desire for a new consensus around the figure of the individual set in opposition to group practice. Further, his description of his involvement with Vorticism as 'my performances and those of my friends' again reflects the significant property of the movements which the attempt to assert the sincere individual denies: that they are not just about the work but about the collective effort to remake culture through intervention, gesture, and spectacle (38).

Significantly, for Lewis, the group – and, specifically, his own group around the magazine *Blast* – is also finished because it has achieved its function: 'What [*Blast*] aimed at destroying in England – the 'academic' of the Royal Academy tradition – is now completely defunct. The freedom of expression, principally in the graphic and plastic arts, desired by it, is now attained...it is hard to realise the bulk of the traditional resistance that its bulk was invented to overpower. How cowed those forces are to-day, or how transformed!' (38). The revolutionary purpose, therefore, to free art from tradition and from the academy, has by 1927 been achieved. For Lewis, it must come to an end both because its purpose had been fulfilled and because its group character had stifled and denied individual talent. In proclaiming, here, the force of Vorticism's 'bulk' – that it was not and could not have been the work of an individual – and the necessity that it be 'invented' – that it had to construct a culture without precedent – Lewis's representation of the collective enterprises becomes

rather contradictory. His assertion that the group formation as such will only ever produce the 'inferior artist' sits uneasily with this triumphalist narrative of Vorticism's revolutionary success.

In order to reconfigure the genuine revolution as the work of a few individuals, in Lewis's narrative, the group must be reconfigured as the sect, and for these purposes he isolates Stein as exemplary of the power of this undesirable form, calling her 'one of the most eminent writers of ...our time-society' (47). Indeed, he uses her to denounce the idea of cultural influence and exchange as such, implying that her status as exemplar in itself reflects the slavish lack of originality in the scene. This negative portrayal of artistic exchange is particularly marked in his representation of parallels between her work and that of Joyce. Describing her practice as a 'stuttering infection' which is so 'contagious' that 'Mr Joyce even has caught it', he attributes what he calls Joyce's 'vices of style' to 'his unorganized susceptibility to influences', in particular the influence of Stein's writing (50; 73). In his analysis of these 'vices' he compares the final paragraph of *Ulysses* to an excerpt from Stein's 'Saints in Seven' in order to 'show a good material for a predatory time-philosophy bearing down upon it and claiming his pen as its natural servant' (108). The comparison of Stein and Joyce provides Lewis with evidence that her influence has stifled and corrupted Joyce's work, and this serves to reveal the fate of genius under the sway of the group. The metaphor of predator and prey presents the genius as the victim of collective ideas. In both of these monographs, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* and *Time and Western Man*, 'modernism' or the 'revolutionary' phase is indeed defined as a movement predicated on group activity and mutual influence, but only in order that these processes can be invalidated as threats to originality and individual talent.

Rodker's dismissal of Stein has much in common with that of Lewis, whom Rodker quotes, and is later echoed by Eliot whose critique of Stein is in the context of a review of Rodker's essay. Rodker's characterisation of her work in particular as having no 'other motive than to grow and flower exactly as she wishes them to grow and flower', ascribes to it an esoteric deadendedness which has nothing for the future. His concluding evaluation of Stein's work in the field of possible futures for literature is also predicated on this characterisation in the explicit decision I have quoted earlier to 'turn from the ungrateful method of Miss Stein' (35-36). It is striking that, like the

other examples in this period, Rodker invokes Stein as a significant practitioner coherent with the general ‘Futurist’ project, only to – or, rather, in order to – remove her from the legacy of the movement. In his conclusion he names a number of authors within a range of very diverse practices, including Marinetti, Apollinaire, Cummings, Joyce, Dostoyevsky, and Chekhov, and, though he has objections to many of them, he accepts the work of each of them as valid inheritances for literary history. For Rodker, Marinetti’s method is ‘an important function of the mind’ which ‘does not deserve the scorn it has met’ and although Apollinaire’s calligrammes are an ‘unimportant’ development, ‘we like them and no doubt posterity will like them’ (85; 87). Cummings, whom he associates with Joyce’s work ‘seems infinitely more suitable a form for posterity’, and, even though Rodker has reservations about Dostoyevsky because of the ‘hysteria’ and the ‘sublimity of the bowels’ his work represents, he concludes ‘let us have our Dostoyevsky and with that everything’ (86; 88).

Rodker’s discussion separates and excludes Stein from all the other authors he accepts. In this process, in presenting her as selfish and ungrateful, Rodker also evokes the person of Stein alongside her practice. The person of Stein, for Rodker and for the other monographs, is constructed as the avatar for the illegitimate, invalid aspects of the movement, namely its esoteric quality and its series of experimental collective cultural interventions. Rolled up, as it were, into the body of Stein – and, as we shall see, her body is a significant fetish in these figurings – the characteristics which trouble the desire for legitimacy are displaced onto the aberrant person of Stein in order to eliminate them from the literary history chosen for posterity.

### **Stein in the future: *The New Criterion*, *The Nation* and *Athenaeum*, *The Dial*, and Mina Loy’s lecture**

These histories and their attendant positioning of Stein embody a definition of and a conversation about a movement, a wrangling over its genealogy and its legacy, which treats it as a finished thing. This conversation was also being had, alongside and in direct response to the 1927 monographs, in the magazines which still formed an important part of the immediate cultural production of that ‘movement’. These, too, speaking from the still-living body of the movement presented in the guides as a

corpse, reveal an anxiety over the future of literature bound into their representations of Stein.

The complex of Stein's more 'live' configurations is first expressed, rather simply, in that initial anonymous review of 'Composition as Explanation' in *The New Criterion*. The problem with Stein is outlined in the claim that 'as a writer she is unquestionably sincere', but that she is 'like our grandparents' because 'as a person, on the other hand, Miss Stein equally resents agreement and curiosity, any attitude in fact except devotion and faith'.<sup>25</sup> In a characterisation which, strikingly, is echoed in the late-twentieth-century defences of her work, she is difficult and problematic because she is not as sincere as a 'person' as she is in the act of writing. This dissonance is linked to the representation of Stein as being out of her time, a view which again has a parallel with the 'avant-garde' arguments that her work will have its real place in the future – in, for example, Language poetry. The assertion that there is 'a gap of fifty years between herself and her creed', suggests that she is out of time with herself, that the two parts of her identity, the writer and the figure who expects 'devotion and faith' are split across time, with the artist producing work that is ahead of its time, and the figure or icon – which commands worship – of Gertrude Stein existing in the previous generation. At this point, however, the criticism is tentative, and expresses a belief in the value of her work. Despite the reservations about her 'person', the article concludes that Stein's work is innovative, worthy of careful study and of value for the future. Describing 'Composition as Explanation' as 'original and obscure', the reviewer advises that the 'three clues' she discloses: 'the continuous present...beginning again and again; and using everything' are 'the heart of the essay' and 'should be studied with care'. Although it is positive about 'Composition as Explanation', this review lays out some of the principal components of Stein's difference or difficulty, which, as we shall see, have more involved elaborations in the other texts.

Lewis's excoriating criticism of Stein in the January 1927 volume of *The Enemy*, and Rodker's dismissal of her in *To-day and To-morrow* seem to encourage more unequivocal positions than that represented by the anonymous reviewer. It appears

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<sup>25</sup> Anonymous, 'Composition as Explanation by Gertrude Stein', p.162. All references to the text are from this page.

that Eliot in particular feels compelled, after the denunciations by Lewis and Rodker, to distance the art he values as far from Stein as possible. At the end of January 1927 and presumably just a few weeks after the anonymous short review of 'Composition as Explanation', Eliot himself presents an unambiguous attack on Stein. Writing in *The Nation and Athenaeum*, he reviews 'Composition as Explanation', alongside Rodker's 'The Future of Futurism' and two other texts. Stating directly that he 'entirely agree[s] with Mr. Rodker's remarks about Miss Stein', he presents a critique of Stein in which he aligns her work with that of 'the author of "I'm Gona Charleston back to Charleston"' and suggests 'its rhythms have a peculiar hypnotic power not met with before' which 'has a kinship with the saxophone'.<sup>26</sup> Here, she is associated with the debasements of popular culture in a direct comparison between her work and the rhythms of popular music. Eliot uses this comparison as a warning about Stein's work ushering in a future which is 'of the barbarians', and, very clearly echoing Rodker's sentiment, he asserts that this future is one, 'in which we should not be interested'. In this way, Eliot aligns himself explicitly with Lewis's and Rodker's view of Stein, marshalling a position on the field with these other men in opposition to Stein as a signifier of the future they want to reject.

In June 1927, in the midst of the argument about Stein, Loy gave her lecture at Natalie Barney's rue Jacob salon. Stein attended with Virgil Thomson who sang two of the pieces he had set to music: 'Preciosilla' and 'Susie Asado'.<sup>27</sup> This followed a series of essays Loy had published in Eliot's *Criterion* in which she explicates and defends Stein's work. The talk, then, in the supportive context of Barney's salon and Loy's enthusiasm, like Riding's account at the end of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, presents ostensibly an alternative position to the negative press that was building momentum in the conversation between Lewis, Rodker and Eliot. The lecture is indeed positive about Stein's work and her contribution to contemporary literature, regretting the fact that this has been 'unrecognised' – a word Loy uses twice – until,

<sup>26</sup> TS Eliot, 'Charleston, Hey! Hey!' p.595. All references to the text are from this page.

<sup>27</sup> See *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson*, ed. by Susan Holbrook and Thomas Dilworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) p.35. Significantly, both of these texts deal with female performers; the Flamenco dancer, Susie Asado and the cupletista, Manuela Tejedor Clemente (stage name Preciosilla). The all-female context of Barney's, 'Academy of Women', the performance of the lecture by Loy, Stein's presence as audience, but also, presumably, as persona, the homage to female sensuality these texts present all suggest an atmosphere of mutual recognition and support. Barney's dismissive response to Stein in her memoir, and the sense of closure implied in Loy's lecture, however, suggest a much more complex picture.

significantly, ‘good old conservative England’ has begun to take note of her.<sup>28</sup> Presumably a reference to Stein’s 1926 lecture, the publication of ‘Composition as Explanation’ by the Hogarth Press, and the discussions about Stein’s work in *The New Criterion*, Loy’s characterisation reflects the context of that conversation about her significance.

Alongside this emphasis on Stein’s recognition, however, Loy also places her firmly outside the contemporary scene at the end of an era, suggesting that:

She has prodigiously broken to bits the raw material of style, and in a radical manner has swept the literary circus clear for future performances. This has given unheard-of courage to innumerable young people.

The recognition of Stein’s work is understood, therefore, as the appreciation of her legacy, and what is important for Loy is what Stein means for the contemporary writers who are her inheritors. Loy presents her as a prodigal and a radical, as ahead of her time in her time, but now standing temporally behind the ‘young’ people among whom she can no longer be counted. Like the dismissals this argument might counter, Loy’s defence of Stein is predicated on her untimeliness, on her isolation. Loy identifies as her central concerns the meaning of contemporaneity and the value of innovation, and works those questions through to a resolution by positing Stein as the bearer of the problem. These representations situate Stein both as that which has passed and as that which has not yet come to pass. For *The New Criterion* reviewer, she is of the past because she is ‘like our grandparents’, and for Loy, it is because she has performed her function: she has ‘swept the literary circus clear’ for ‘young people’. Loy’s emphasis on her age and her use of the past tense – as if she is the previous generation – presents her as the radical who has freed art but whose function is now fulfilled and so is finished.<sup>29</sup> In Eliot’s *Nation and Athenaeum* reading, the Steinian future is ‘likely’ yet ‘the future in which we should not be interested’, and for Loy, the ‘future performances’ of literature are not so much influenced by Stein as facilitated by the erasure, the emptiness her work has brought about. Stein is seen here not in terms of the value of her writing but the value of her action – as that which has prepared the ground for the art of the future. There is a violence in Loy’s account of

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<sup>28</sup> Natalie Barney, *Adventures of the Mind* p.172. All references to the text are from this page.

<sup>29</sup> In 1927, Stein is 53, Loy 45. Both moved to Paris in 1903.

Stein having ‘broken to bits the raw material of style’, a radical disruption which seems for Loy to be the function of Stein’s work. Using the metaphor of circus and performance, Loy’s theatre is now empty. As in Riding’s argument, Stein’s work has purified the literary scene so literature can return to year zero. Once again, rather than being either heralded or dismissed for her work in itself, Stein is significant because of what her legacy might mean for the future of literary culture.

After the publication of Lewis’s *Time and Western Man* in book form late in 1927, and in a direct response to the parallels between Stein and Ezra Pound Lewis draws in it, Eliot’s 1928 article in *The Dial* seems to reflect a desire to draw a line under the debate and end the discussion of the movement at the same moment as it ends the discussion of Stein. Eliot rejects the notion of a revolutionary movement, sets up the individual in its place, and explicitly selects Pound as the valid exemplar in contrast to Stein, suggesting that, ‘We can now see that there was no movement, no revolution, and there is no formula. The only revolution was that Ezra Pound was born with a fine ear for verse’.<sup>30</sup> In order to dismiss Stein as he dismisses the revolution, Eliot says of Lewis’s book ‘Mr Lewis is a little hasty, and might lead the inexperienced reader to believe that Pound’s rhythms spring from the same source as those of Miss Stein. And this is wholly untrue: they have nothing in common’ (6). In a development of the previous representation of Stein’s work as springing from the same source as jazz, Pound is presented as a fount of poetic genius in direct contrast to Stein. This gesture, of deliberately distinguishing Stein from Pound, is clearly designed to draw a line between the acceptable and the unacceptable. It is also significant that this distinction is presented as a definitive one, yet one which can only be understood by the expert. The view that the ‘inexperienced reader’ would be excused for drawing the conclusion, prompted by Lewis’s argument, that Stein and Pound share an aesthetic suggests that, to the untrained eye, they have qualities in common. This reader appears to correspond to Lewis’s ‘layman’, Rodker’s ‘popular mind’ and the ‘plain’ reader constructed in Graves and Riding’s *Survey*. Eliot is also clearly concerned with the representation of recent literary history for a broadening audience.<sup>31</sup> It is also significant in that it assigns to Eliot the position of the expert whose special

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<sup>30</sup> Eliot, ‘Isolated Superiority’, p.5. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the *Survey* originated as a proposed collaboration between Eliot, Graves and Riding initially entitled *Untraditional Elements in Poetry*.



knowledge give him the authority to determine not just the value of a writer's work but the definition of what a writer is.

To this end, the question of whether or not Pound's and Stein's works share overt characteristics, how far their work has value, is not Eliot's main concern. Rather, he is anxious to point out that they do not 'spring from the same source'. The most important distinction for Eliot is that of origin, and his metaphor here proposes an ontological difference, not between Pound's and Stein's work, which may, to the inexperienced reader, seem to have something in common, but between the very bases of their practice. This is not therefore so much a defence of Pound's fine ear for verse or his devotion to poetry, as an argument that what Pound writes, and what he has devoted himself to, is 'the art of verse', and that what Stein is doing is something other than that (4). For Eliot, Stein is not a writer, and it is this use of Stein as a trope for what writing either is not, should not be or can no longer be, for the element which should now be excised, that is the characteristic activity of all these disavowals of the revolutionary experimental practices of the previous decades. Indeed, the isolation of individual figures means that the expert can determine, not just which writing has value and which writing does not, but who is a writer and who is not.

Eliot's isolation of Pound and Stein enables him simultaneously to dissolve the category of the 'revolutionary' period which Lewis constructs and to isolate Stein, as Rodker does, as an individual pursuing her own esoteric aims. Thus, in erasing the scene within which this writing made its meaning, Eliot brings the single writers forward into sharp relief. It is this move which enables him, as it does the other critics (in varying degrees), to detach Stein from the context in which her work generated meaning. Stein is both of the past and representative of the future in which, in the end for both Eliot and Loy, she should not feature. In Loy's configuration, Stein is placed at the origins, a cypher for both an original radicalism and for its inevitable closure. She is also presented by both writers as an individual actor, rather than one embedded in the complex scene of the cultural field. For very different purposes, then, both Loy and Eliot, as do all the other writers, construct a Stein who is an exceptional individual in order to isolate and clarify the current of contemporary literature they want to end. This is the abject Stein: the Stein thrown from the train of history.

### **The abject figure of Stein**

The consensus around Stein as an abject figure who can no longer be counted as a writer gains momentum from her 1926 lecture, its publication and its first review through Lewis, Rodker, Eliot, Loy and Riding and Graves. When we trace the dynamics of this conversation, we find a striking accord with the process Stein embodies in her 1912 portrait of Matisse. After a wrangling about the value and status of her work which almost replicates the argument about whether Matisse is a 'great one', the conversation seems to move to a position of certainty. However different their positions may seem to be, the final consensus is that Stein's work does not belong in the contemporary moment from which these writers speak.

The components which construct Stein as the failed, finished, or undesirable element of modernism gather through the series of position-takings and take on many related permutations. Across these texts, a range of common motifs emerge which are used to figure her as the aberration from which literature must now move on. The prevailing configuration associates Stein with the barbaric, the primitive, the savage and the uncivilised, in order to have her as something distinct, not just from the culture the writers desire, but from culture as such. The barbaric provides a negative image of modernity in which the beginning again of the modern, which wipes the slate clean in its emphasis on the present and the unprecedented, becomes a new primal scene without a history. Images of the primitive also multiply into a range of related conceptual clusters which develop the presentation of Stein's work as either an empty function which moves literature into the future rather than as a body of literature in itself, or as an illegitimate practice from which culture must turn away. These related ideas include the parallels drawn between her work and what is figured as a debased or barbaric popular culture, images of the child, the simpleton and the demented, and the many intimations of the unformed, ill-formed or sick self, figured as sexual deviance, gender ambiguity and racial otherness.

Early in the conversation, in *The New Criterion's* January 1927 review, the image of the primitive cult is hinted at in the references to Stein's 'creed' and to the 'devotion and faith' she expects. As we have seen, the indication that Stein is primitive or barbaric becomes much more explicit in the subsequent texts and functions as a way

of defining her work as exemplary of a practice which is not art and therefore does not belong in a civilised culture. This is developed in all the critiques and forms the basic material from which many of the other abject configurations emerge. It begins in earnest with Lewis, who uses the trope in the section of *Time and Western Man* first printed in *The Enemy*. The image of Stein as the significant figure in a primitive cult is a significant aspect of his reconfiguration, as I have discussed, of the group as sect. The emphasis on the primitive which this representation requires is clear in his assertion that ‘she is working in the strictest conformity with all the other “time”-doctrinaires, who have gathered in such disciplined numbers, so fanatically disciplined, as though to the beating of a ritualistic drum’ (49). His emphasis on discipline intimates the narrow confines of a crude doctrine which discourages individual expression, and the drumbeat and the reference to ritual evoke an image of barbaric paganism. This is picked up, as we have seen, in Rodker’s characterisation of her work as an extreme form of the ‘primitive and savage’ force of Futurism, and then developed in Eliot’s dismissal of her work as ‘of the barbarians’. Riding and Graves, in defence of Stein, quote Eliot’s article directly in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, and they then develop his notion of the ‘barbaric’ into a conceptualisation of the modernism Stein exemplifies. In their account, as I have mentioned, Stein is ascribed the status of the only modernist who is successful in ‘practising scientific barbarism literally’ so much so that her ‘words are primitive’ because they ‘have no history’ (136). The lack of civilised sophistication is also linked to the representation of Stein as outside her own time. As we have seen in the first review, as in the later monographs and articles, and even in Loy’s sympathetic lecture, Stein is always decontextualized as either behind her time in a savage primal realm or ahead of her time in a barbaric future. The trope of the primitive is developed through the conversation about Stein and it comes to have a number of resonances all of which function to remove her from the cultural scene of 1927. The construction of Stein as primitive rewrites her work as cult, not culture, displaces it from its contemporary context as pre- or post-historic, presents her as a barbaric totem rather than a writer, and, perhaps most potently, figures her as a primordial form of the human rather than as a fully achieved self.

As I have pointed out, the concepts of primitivism and barbarism are also strongly associated with mass culture, and this seems to be one of the key anxieties expressed

about the direction of art in this conversation. Stein and the practices she exemplifies are represented as being too close to the modernity of mass culture, and this fear, and its connection with the trope of the primitive, are exemplified in Lewis's description of her work as 'the monstrous, desperate, soggy *lengths* of primitive mass-life' (82). This view is also evident in Eliot's review in *The Nation and Athenaeum*, in which he wonders 'whether the omens are not with Miss Stein and the author of "I'm Gona Charleston Back to Charleston" rather than with Mr Cummings or Mr D.H. Lawrence' (595). Eliot's binary, alongside his characterisation of both Stein and the newly popularised forms exemplified by jazz as barbaric, aligns Stein with popular culture and distinguishes her from other poets who, in this formulation, provide a civilised alternative to mass culture rather than being entangled with it. In many of the texts involved in this conversation, Stein's association with popular culture is the dangerous result of the dissolution of the author and an argument for the reinstatement of the author as a special individual.

For Lewis, the identification of Stein with popular culture is very explicit. In 'There is all the craft of the Charlie Chaplin appeal, all those little dissimulated threads run cunningly to the great big silly heart of the innocent public, in the mannerism of Miss Stein and Miss Loos' he associates the figure of Stein with mass culture production, fixing on the clearest examples of this moment, Anita Loos, whose 1926 *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* was a bestseller, and Charlie Chaplin, whose 1925 *The Gold Rush* was the fifth highest grossing silent film in cinema history (57). Lewis provides the comparison in order to imply the fraudulence of Stein's art, emphasised in his references to 'craft', to dissimulation, to cunning and Stein's 'mannerism'. A disgust for the 'mass', is evoked in the repetition of the term and variations upon it. Lewis alludes to *Three Lives* as 'the simplicity, the illiterateness, of the mass-average of the Melancthas and Annas' and describes Stein's work as 'undoubtedly intended as an epic contribution to the present mass-democracy'. The cheap tawdriness of consumerism is also ascribed to Stein's work, described as 'jumbled, cheap, slangy and thick to suit' (60). The apparently unprocessed relation to modernity in Stein's work is figured by Lewis in the image of a mass-produced object: 'its life is a low-grade, if tenacious, one; of the sausage, by-the-yard, variety' (59).

The conception that Stein – and therefore the position she exemplifies – is bound up with mass culture is revealed more subtly and perhaps less consciously in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*. Stein's work is 'divinely inspired in ordinariness', 'so grossly, so humanly, so all-inclusively ordinary', and an example of 'mass-automatism' (139). Although not explicitly referencing it, the juxtaposition of the ordinary and the mass and the notion of inclusiveness allude to popular culture's majority appeal and the global reach of its representations of the human condition. For Riding and Graves, Stein's pure expression of modernism as ordinary, inclusive and human is tinged, despite their ostensibly supportive stance towards her work, with the disdain and fear, the disgust, shown in Eliot's article. The adverb 'grossly' intimates this disgust, but it is also conveyed in the repetition of phrases such as 'mass humanity', 'mass-ordinariness', and 'mass-automatism', which they use to define the 'barbaric absolute' that modernism, in their conception, appears to seek. The accumulation of these references has the effect of reinforcing, in their very repetition, the horror of the mass tide overwhelming the 'talent of the artist to see things "as no one else sees them"'. There are parallels with Lewis's portrayal of the modernism embodied in Stein's work as too close to modernity, rather than standing in a defined position at a critical distance from it. For Riding and Graves, the problem with modernism is that it no longer enables the artist to be defined by difference from the time in which s/he stands: the 'creative originality which is supposed to reveal the eccentricity latent in obviousness to this mass humanity equipped only to see the obvious' (138). Thus, modernism is undifferentiated from the unprocessed modernity which makes up the mass culture they want it to stand beyond.

In these 1927 examples, Lewis, Eliot, Riding and Graves all suggest that the practice and the position embodied for them in Stein is problematic because it cannot be differentiated from mass culture. Alongside the apprehension that the literature of the early twentieth century is too close to the modernity of mass culture runs another related current in these critiques: the association of Stein's forms with racial otherness. The experience of racial difference in modernity for these writers is fused with the exotic and the 'savage' and becomes a significant trope in the othering of Stein. Perhaps the strangest example of this is Lewis's characterisation, 'Gertrude Stein's prose-song is a cold, black, suet-pudding', which imbues the reassuring food of an Empire childhood with a sinister difference imparted by blackness (59). More

straightforwardly, Eliot's association of Stein's work with jazz and Lewis's description of her as 'the jazz-sibyl' suggest at once the modern 'rhythms' of the black music which has entered the mainstream and, in the notions of hypnosis and ancient oracles, an exoticism which once again evokes her otherness (50). Rodker also figures Stein in these terms, in his definition of her writings as 'mantrams' and by suggesting, as Eliot does in his review of Stein's text alongside Rodker's, that her repetitions have a 'hypnotic value'(35; 38). Significantly, the mutual influence of these men and the currents of conceptualisation which pass between them are overtly displayed in Rodker's quotation from Lewis's opinions on Stein. Rodker's citation of Lewis's view that Stein 'lyricises her utterances on the same principle as that of Hebrew poetry', shows how far the depiction of Stein as racially other is the product of this kind of conversation (35, n1). Even Loy, however, identifies Stein as a 'prophetess', and Riding later calls her 'a large-scale mystic', both of which evoke a vague sense of the exotic otherness of 'eastern' religions.<sup>32</sup>

The otherness connoted in these references is also manifested in images of physical difference. References to the sick, grotesque or ill-formed body proliferate in particular in Lewis's account. Stein is imagined as an obese or disabled child 'bloated, acromegalic, squinting and spectacted' (47), suggesting an incompleteness, a sick self only marginally human. Her work is often envisaged as an obese body, as 'slab after slab of this heavy, insensitive, common prose-song churns and lumbers by' (59) which is 'all fat, without nerve', implying ill-health and weakness. She is also associated with 'contemporary inverted-sex fashions' (52), again portrayed as mental and physical sickness. Riding also figures Stein as vast and formless in her 'gross automatism' and 'mass-originality' which she describes as a 'large-scale process'.<sup>33</sup> The lack of precision, the images of formlessness or malformation present Stein as an unformed, indeterminate, unbounded subject which resists the definition required of the isolated genius. Here, Stein is suspect, even horrifying, because she cannot be identified, once again reflecting the urge to isolate the genius, both from modernity and in literary history.

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<sup>32</sup> Barney, *Adventures of the Mind*, p.172; Riding, *Contemporaries and Snobs*, p.81.

<sup>33</sup> Riding, *Contemporaries and Snobs*, p.81.

The conception of Stein as subhuman and therefore an incomplete self also gathers around her in associations with the simpleton, the idiot and the lunatic. Again, Lewis is most overt in this representation, aligning her refusal to explain her work as one of the ‘tricks...of the asylum patient’ (52) for which she ‘is heavily indebted to the poor honest lunatic’ (60) and in which, ‘she would roll her eyes, squint, point in a frenzy at some object, and, of course, stammer hard’ (48). This representation, however, is used to reinforce the portrayal of Stein as a fraud: she is simply ‘shamming’ madness, feigning the role of the lunatic in order to avoid being fully and personally called to account for her suspect practice. The role of the idiot is, for Lewis, another example of Stein’s charlatanry. Although she literally produces ‘monotonous, imbecile, endlessly-repeated words’, which seem to emanate from the brutish entity indicated in the caricature ‘it squats with a grunt’ (60), this is yet another example of her fraudulence. Lewis’s suggestion that, because she is a writer, the ‘massive silence of the full idiot is, unfortunately, out of her reach’ (61), implies that the pose of the idiot is another species of sham. In a further remove from the sincere and authentic self which Lewis categorises as the ‘individual talent’, Stein is not simply an imbecile: she is pretending to be an imbecile. Lewis’s grotesque satire clearly functions as an unequivocal dismissal of Stein, but the same kind of trope is also present in Riding’s defence in *Contemporaries and Snobs*. Her claim that ‘No one but Miss Stein has been willing to be as ordinary as simple, as primitive, as stupid, as barbaric as successful barbarism demands’ and her reference to the ‘perfect simplicity of her mind’ also construct Stein as – this time – a genuine simpleton, but one whose simplicity is the inevitable and appropriate product of the logic of modernism.<sup>34</sup>

Bound up with the tropes of the simpleton and the ‘demented’, the association of Stein with the figure of the child creates a number of resonances. For Lewis, it is the figure of the child which most strongly features in his construction of Stein’s illegitimacy, though there is a flavour of this in Rodker’s connection of Stein with the primitive and his characterisation of her ingratitude – a charge associated with the image of the spoilt child. In the final chapter of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, Riding and Graves also evoke the figure of the child in order to identify the ways in which Stein exemplifies modernism and has carried out its project with what she calls ‘an

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<sup>34</sup> Riding, *Contemporaries and Snobs*, p.78; p.82.

authentic barbarism' (138). The child, in particular for Lewis and Riding, as well as standing in for the anxiety about the absence of the unified or fully developed individual, is also used to posit a reading of the contemporary emphasis on the present as that which precludes development and returns to first principles and the unformed, primitive state. This is explicit in Lewis's claim that the 'child-cult' he identifies as exemplified by Stein 'is connected with the cult of the primitive and the savage' (51). Riding's description of Stein's work, in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, as the product of 'an artificially assumed and regulated child-mentality' also emphasises the immediacy of the child's grasp of time: 'the child's time-sense is so vivid that an occurrence is always consecutive to itself, it goes on and on, it has been going on and on, it will be going on and on' (*Survey*, 140). The child in these representations both lives in the present continuous flux of time conceived of as a series of single moments and is not yet formed as a full individual with a developed identity. The emphasis on the present in the figure of the child therefore serves to link the 'primitive' attention to the present explicitly with the incoherent subject. Thus, for these writers the coherent author these texts posit as the only intelligible unit of value cannot exist in the movement they conceptualise.

All the texts use Stein as the central trope in their identification of the culture of the group, movement or artistic revolution as threats to individual greatness. These revisions achieve a number of things. They mean that these writers, particularly Lewis, Riding and Graves and Eliot, can dismiss the movements they identify as characterised by slavish faddishness. This in turn means they can deny the validity of mutual meaning-making and so assert the necessity for judgements of value predicated on the author's individuality. Central to all the figurings of Stein as abject, therefore, is the concept of authorial identity. The critiques of Stein coalesce around the question of the author's sincerity, connected to the resurgence in all these commentaries of the figure of the coherent genius. On Eliot's terms, this is the, 'isolated' 'devoted', figure of the hermetic artist; for Lewis it is 'the individual talent', stifled by group identity; and for Riding, the emphasis is on the 'personal authority' of the 'Genius' excessively compromised by the professionalization of poetry. The question of Stein's sincerity, therefore, is the question of authorship that these writers struggle with in their reframings, and this is expressed in the many and varied intimations, as I have outlined, that she is not a full, coherent or stable



‘person’. The desire to reinstate or insist upon the unity of the creative genius comes out of an anxiety about the relative status of the artist, the work and its audience, which was in itself created by the early problematizing of existing paradigms. This resurgence represents an urge to stabilise these relations in order to re-establish a firm set of criteria with which to judge the value and meaning of the work. Significantly, then, these constructions of Stein’s difference serve to map a landscape of anxieties about this history. The complex of tropes around Stein is generated in anxieties over the incomplete, split or contradictory self they use her to embody: Stein is a locus for the anxieties about the loss of the coherent author-figure. In order to isolate the author from the context into which many of these writers feel it has dissolved, Stein becomes the icon for what the author is not or should not be. She becomes the sacrificial object in the re-sacralisation of the author-figure.

Importantly, and in another move which reveals much about the motives for these representations of Stein, the emphasis on the coherent author who must stand out from the group enables them to establish the necessity for the identification of the authentic genius as opposed to the charlatan. Lewis points out Stein’s distinctiveness but he is also careful to negate the legitimacy of any individuality this might assign to her. Once he has set her up as a powerful icon, he clearly feels it is necessary to neutralise any value this might confer. He makes this clear in a qualifying statement toward the end of Volume 1: ‘Miss Stein I have dealt with at length, but not because she seems to me a writer of any great importance; rather, living comfortably at the heart of things, and associated with all the main activities of the time, she is a rallying-point that it was convenient to take’ (111). Stein is noted but not recognised, a ‘rallying-point’, a locus or cypher for the practice of the group which signifies a lack of authenticity. Thus, the association with a group or a shared or interactive basis for artistic practice in itself becomes a marker of the mediocrity intimated by Lewis’s casual dismissal and the lazy fraudulence implied by his image of Stein ‘living comfortably at the heart of things’. The significance of Stein’s position for this revision, and indeed for the other claims for the death of the movement, is sharply outlined in this disclaimer. The identification of Stein as a cypher for group culture of modernism is claimed as the ground upon which she can be dismissed. This reinforces once again the emphasis on the value of the authenticity of the individual genius set up in opposition to the cultural interchange figured as either fraudulent or as the context in which the

fraudulent artist can flourish. The discrediting of the group per se and the emphasis on the identification of the real author among frauds are instrumental moves toward the logic of the canon.

### **The authentic author and the fraud**

The attempts to fix historical parameters and to isolate individual practitioners and works, I would argue, has much to do with the urge to construct a canon for a legitimate movement which must define itself against the illegitimate forms which have been mocked, trivialised or demonised in the public sphere. Rodker's essay opens with a conception of the history of Futurism as the site of public controversy: 'Of Futurism so much has been said in the past fifteen years that, with a country very much divided on the subject of Mr Epstein's Rima, some belated definition seems necessary' (5). Rodker's reference to belatedness gives his discussion the quality of a retrospective elucidation, and yet his allusion to the controversy surrounding Jacob Epstein's sculpture makes the debate a live issue. Erected in the Hyde Park Bird Sanctuary in 1925 as a memorial to the novelist and naturalist W.H. Hudson, 'Rima' provides for Rodker a dramatization of the problematic position of the Futurist work in this period. Commissioned and supported by writers, artists, journalists and publishers, among whom were John Galsworthy, Joseph Conrad, G.K. Chesterton, Walter de la Mare, William Rothenstein (Principal of the Royal College of Art), and the publishers J.M. Dent and Gerald Duckworth, the sculpture was unveiled by the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin in July 1925. Despite its apparently legitimate provenance, the response of the popular press was 'unequalled in venom and spite and often delivered in provocative and brutal language'. The sculpture was characterised in the tabloid papers as 'The Hyde Park Atrocity', 'A Travesty of Nature', 'A Nightmare in Stone' and as a representation of the art of the 'Bolshevik', as 'Socialist Taste' or as 'Anarchism'.<sup>35</sup> Both belated and current, the controversy over Futurism, for Rodker, has gone on too long and now seems habitual or compulsive rather than meaningful, discrediting artistic production rather than modernising it.

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<sup>35</sup> Terry Friedman, *'The Hyde Park Atrocity': Epstein's Rima: Creation and Controversy* (Leeds: The Henry Moore Centre for the Study of Sculpture, 1988), p.5.

Rodker's attention to the Rima controversy reflects the desire to legitimise modernism, to move from that position of controversy. This very often expresses itself in the fear of accusations of fraud, and this fear, I would argue, lies at the heart of these retellings and of the denunciation of Stein. The works produced in the early twentieth century, as we have seen, had to make not just an audience and a market for their reception, but a whole new world in which they made sense: new methods of production and dissemination and new definitions of the artist, work, patron and audience. In these conditions fraud becomes a strange concept because the fear of being denounced as a fraud is complicated when authenticity is defined in ways which have no precedent. This ambivalence is heightened by the public mockery in popular responses. The uncertainty about the status of the artist and the work of art is a significant aspect of that early moment precisely because it challenged these notions at their very foundation. Indeed, contemporary popular criticism repeatedly levelled the accusation of cultishness, degeneration and fraudulence at the work in order to discredit it, as the title and subtitles of a *Daily Sketch* article on Roger Fry's 1912 second Post-Impressionist exhibition exemplifies: 'Art Gone Mad. Queer Perversions of the Post-Impressionists. Paint box Freaks. Cult of the Crazily Ugly and its Childish Results'.<sup>36</sup> More serious reviews of those early practices, for example of the 1913 Armory Show, also present similar views. Milton W Brown's record of responses in American newspapers finds that:

Harriet Monroe [writing for the *Chicago Tribune*], still fighting off the inevitable conversion, wrote that Matisse seemed to her 'fundamentally insincere' and that he talked 'blague in a loud voice'. The critic of the Boston *Transcript* found Matisse and the Cubists 'playing a game of mystification'. Mather [the *Nation*] gave his readers a choice, Cubism was either 'a clever hoax or a negligible pedantry'. Cox, [the *New York Times*] not to be outdone, offered 'sheer insanity or triumphant charlatanry'.<sup>37</sup>

These dismissals share a striking similarity with the later representations of Stein: of insincerity and charlatanry; of the blague of a fraudulent decadence; and of the Steinian primitive cult or sect. The early formations are discredited as primitive cults for a number of significant reasons: because they appear unintelligible on any terms other than their own; because they are practiced in the context of networks of small groups; because they do not engage with the broader cultural context in familiar or

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in *Mock Modernism: An Anthology of Parodies, Travesties, Frauds, 1910-1935*, ed. by Leonard Diepeveen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2014), p.10.

<sup>37</sup> Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, p.135.

established ways; and because, in challenging the very terms upon which art is predicated, they appear to go back to the beginning of representation. The small group with a theory about art is also open to accusations of fraud or hoax because, being predicated on a theory, the artwork can be judged by no criteria other than its own.

The fact that the 1920's reframings of the early period use the same figures – the primitive cult, the freak, the simpleton and the fraud – to dismiss Stein reveals a significant point about the ways in which the narratives attempt to construct a more acceptable form. The early mockeries in the popular press attempt to delegitimise the new art by using these tropes. The portrayals of Stein in the 1920s, in appropriating these same tropes in their disparagement of her, in one clean stroke distance them from that condemnation and the practices which drew it. Stein's dismissal in these 1920's texts is, in essence, a necessary action in order to construct a legitimate form against which such accusations cannot be brought. Because they are the same as the mockeries and outrage of the popular reception of the 1910s, these claims against Stein's legitimacy perform the same kind of activity: just as the early parodies, as Leonard Diepeveen argues in the introduction to his recent anthology *Mock Modernism*, 'fenced things off by precluding serious, nuanced discussion', so the memoirs fence Stein off from the serious contemplation of literary history.<sup>38</sup>

### **Stein in *The New Criterion***

Before 1927, Stein had already begun to recognise the ambivalent attitude to her practice and her position. There is clearly an interest in her work, a sense that it is significant, but there is also an uncertainty about its value. This is, for Stein, represented by Eliot's hesitations about publishing her work in *The New Criterion*. As Ulla Dydo has shown, the communication between Stein and Eliot through 1925 and 1926 represents a series of polite snubs which hold Stein in the awkward role of the supplicant.<sup>39</sup> This is reflected in 'The Fifteenth of November', the piece Eliot did finally publish in *The New Criterion* in January 1926. This text identifies and works through these rejections and embodies a critique of the exclusion and marginalisation they represent. Stein inhabits the discourse of the rejection letter, contemplating the

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<sup>38</sup> Diepeveen *Mock Modernism*, p.163

<sup>39</sup> Ulla Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: The Language that Rises* pp.106-107.

register and mode of the genre from within in a series of ironized repetitions. She also explores the binary language of choice and selection, reflecting the processes of inclusion and exclusion which characterise the fluctuating responses to her work in this period.

The first stanza ends with the stark minor sentences, 'To deny twice. Once or twice'. This introduces the theme of rejection and implies, in its dismissive lack of precision, the coldly casual indifference of exclusion.<sup>40</sup> This is represented through the first half of the text, not least in the fifth stanza: 'The idea is that as for a very good reason anything can be chosen the choice the choice is included'. Here, a cynicism about the processes of choice and inclusion is indicated in the phrase 'The idea is' which implies an abstract intention which is never actually achieved, and in the ironic exaggeration of 'for a very good reason', which echoes the voice of the editor who protests too much. The second stanza represents a response to the feeling that the rejection of her work is based on little knowledge or understanding of it, that the denials in their indifference are a refusal to engage with Stein at all rather than a straightforward decision about the quality of the work itself:

On the fifteenth of November in place of what was undoubtedly a reason for finding and in this way the best was found to be white or black and as the best was found out to be nearly as much so as was added. To be pleased with the result (71).

References to editorial categorisations and choices or judgements of taste and value, introduced here in 'white or black', the repetition of 'the best', and the phrase 'pleased with the result', proliferate in varying forms throughout the piece, for example in adjectival and adverbial phrases such as 'too sweet', 'desirable' and 'awfully well chosen' (71; 72). Stein indicates in these lines, however, that her choice of subject matter for the text, simply of the date it was written, is chosen 'in place of' a serious decision about her own choice, her 'reason for finding' a suitable piece for *The New Criterion*. The title of the text therefore signifies a randomised choice, and this is made explicit in the repetition of the date 'the fifteenth of November' throughout. Stein's critique of the processes of exclusion is embodied here in a refusal to engage with the process of selection at all.

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<sup>40</sup> Gertrude Stein, 'The Fifteenth of November', in *The New Criterion*, 4:1 (January 1926), 71-75 (p.71). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

There are also traces of anxiety about the uncertainty of Stein's reception and of her consciousness that the work must please the audience represented by Eliot – or be adjusted to suit it – in, for example, 'Please please please them', 'less less and more' and 'it can be a pleasure' (72; 73). The emphasis on taste and the many references to pleasing and pleasure show the difficulty of the supplicant position for Stein. In order to receive the recognition of *The New Criterion*, her work must be to its taste: she must 'please' it. When used as a verb, the word signifies the position of the one who must convince or gratify the other. Repeated contiguously in 'Please please them. Please please please them', and 'Please please half of it', 'please' works as both verb and adverb – pleasing and pleading – and overdetermines the position of the plaintiff (72). The many repetitions of 'please' and 'pleasure', however, also work as echoes of the etiquette of the letter. 'Please' as an adverb is phatic, empty of denotational meaning, and functions only to convey politeness.

Writing out of and across the form and register of the formal letter, Stein's text draws out the processes of cultural conformity the discourse enacts. The salutation, the valediction and the conventional phrasing of the formal letter, in particular the use of the passive voice, are spun out in repetitions and juxtapositions which begin to take on the 'darker' meanings suggested in the line 'In any accidental case no incident no repetition no darker thoughts can be united again' (71). In the rejection letter, the 'darker thoughts' of the exclusion and erasure represented by that rejection are displaced by the detached passive voice and formal language of conventional politeness. Stein's text works through these conventions to reunite them with the dark thoughts they obscure – that is, the inherent violence of exclusion which the detachment and distance of politeness and formality, in a further act of violence, seeks to disclaim. The process of exclusion is identified in several forms in the text. The lines, 'Entirely a different thing. Entirely a different thing when all of it has been awfully well chosen and thoughtfully corrected', for example, evoke the journal editor's justifications. The imposition of otherness on the rejected work in 'entirely a different thing' is connected to the affirmations of selection which serve simply to reassert the criteria of the selection itself (72). The self-congratulatory 'awfully well chosen' and 'thoughtfully corrected' point out the closed circuit of this process. The adverb, a feature of the formal letter which both intensifies and justifies the letter

writer's actions, as shown throughout by Stein's repetitions – 'really', 'actually', 'entirely', 'finally', 'surely' – also serves here to soften the activities of choosing and correction, masking the processes of elimination and deletion they entail.

Through the central section of the text, in a series of repetitions on the relations between 'he' and 'we', Stein locates the function of the passive voice she parodies: to construct the voice of the institution. Once again, Stein intervenes in a context which frames and regulates artistic production. The truncated lines and repetitive monosyllables separate this stanza from the rest of the text:

He said we, and we.  
We said he.  
He said we.  
We said he, and he.  
He said.  
We said.  
We said it. As we said it (72).

The distinctive form of this section also serves to link it with a stanza towards the end of the piece which contains many of the same formal features:

He said enough.  
Enough said.  
He said enough.  
Enough said.  
Enough said.  
He said enough.  
He said enough.  
Enough said.  
He said enough (74-75).

The first iteration shows how the individual as a functionary of the regulatory process comes to stand in for it – and vice versa. The declarations of the individual ('he') become the declarations of the regulating body ('we'), meaning that the individual speaks for and as that body, appearing to abnegate any personal responsibility or subjective involvement. The individual and the context from which he speaks become interchangeable. Stein's engagement with the contexts for artistic production thus far has been one of intervention. It has been a series of attempts to rethink or reshape functions and relations as an important aspect of her experimentation and in line with much of the activity around her. This poem reflects a response to what she clearly

perceives as an institution for the regulation of artistic production which wishes more and more explicitly to exclude her.

This is developed in the second representation, which plays with the possibilities of the idiomatic 'enough said' to show once again the violence of exclusion and to link it more explicitly to the processes of the institution. The stanza begins with the phrase 'he said enough' which indicates a functional speech act, the speaker who says enough to achieve his purpose. Communication here is a purposeful activity in which the speaker controls what is said, judging whether it is enough, saying just enough to be understood. In the context of the rejection letter this reflects the editor who politely and carefully makes the exclusion very clear without being explicit or direct – saying enough for the recipient to get the point. Read another way, with 'he said' as a reporting clause, and 'enough' as the utterance (He said, 'Enough'), it also signifies a forceful termination of the speech of another and therefore presents the rejection as an aggressive silencing. The second line, 'Enough said' develops the implications of the first, drawing out the function of the idiom in the processes of exclusion and inclusion. 'Enough said' is a coded communication which activates an engagement in an implicit agreement and shared understanding. Like a wink of complicity, it both indicates and prompts an unspoken collusion. Again, in the context of the rejection, no more needs to be said because there is already an unspoken understanding about who is included and who is excluded. The editor therefore, rather than making an active choice, simply follows the established line in which the culture of the institution already colludes. 'Enough said' is a reassurance that what is presupposed still holds true, a reference to something so obvious it does not need to be said.

The final stanza of the piece is made up of a single repetitive sentence which diverges significantly from the rest of the text and represents in a very simple form an alternative to the exclusion Stein sees in these rejections.

Not only wool and woolen silk and silken not only silk and silken wool and woolen not only wool and woolen silk and silken not only silk and silken wool and woolen not only wool and woolen silk and silken not only silk and silken not only wool and woolen not only wool and woolen not only silk and silken not only silk and silken not only wool and woolen. (75).



Woven like the textiles which form its content, this sentence uses contrasting threads to represent ideas of value judgement. The exclusiveness and sophistication of silk is juxtaposed with the everyday homespun value of wool, representing in a simple form the distinction made in elitist selection criteria. In a negation of this kind of selectivity, Stein integrates the two potentially antithetical strands by including both of them in her sentence and giving them equal weight. This is achieved in both the repetition of 'not only' and in the form of their repetition, in which they are placed in interchangeable positions in the sentence. Rather than rejecting silk in favour of wool – so rather than rejecting the kinds of choices made by the institution – and rather than setting up another paradigm in which a different set of exclusive value judgements pertain, Stein maintains the openness of a refusal to select. This returns us to the theme of her initial refusal to select a meaningful title, and the text in its random chance-based subject matter therefore both speaks of and embodies a challenge to that exclusivity. Rather than expressing a rejection of the institution, Stein's intervention represents once again an attempt to shape it, to challenge its processes of selection in order that her work is accepted by it. Her challenge to what one might call the developing institution of modernism reflects a desire to be included.

### **Inheriting the abject**

Foucault, writing in 1969 from the other side of literary history's reconstruction of the author, captures in his definition, I would suggest, the delimiting function this figure provides in the late 1920's revisions of modernism:

the author is not an indefinite source of significations that fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction.<sup>41</sup>

The 'free circulation', manipulation, composition and so on which Foucault claims the author function impedes could well be a description of the network movement which is displaced in the late 1920's narratives by the author figure. The early-twentieth-century activities had complicated the concept of the author because its

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<sup>41</sup> Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology* ed. by James D Faubion, *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, II* trans. by Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1998), pp.205-222 (pp.221-222).

works were, overtly, not ‘made’ in isolation. Indeed, these practices challenged the paradigm which takes authorship for granted. Stein is the locus of this fear about the uncertainty of authorship in the 1920s, and this uncertainty reflects the fear at the heart of these reconfigurations, in which ‘the author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning’.

Riding’s view of Stein’s work, that her words are ‘so automatic that it is even inexact to speak of Miss Stein as their author: they create one another’, locates the anxiety out of which these late 1920’s reframings emerge.<sup>42</sup> The banishment of Stein from the future is a way of marking a difference between the fraudulent and the authentic poet and between the empty persona and the genius author, but it is also a way of dismissing the multiple group culture in order to establish a canon of legitimised authors producing individual masterworks. In these revisions, modernism seeks a future for itself by reasserting the author function. The individual works however, have thus far only made sense in relation to the context of other works and the multiple cultural fields generated by the provisional institutions – magazines, groups, international networks, its own bodies of theory and scholarship, anthologies, collections – it throws up. Its texts have produced meaning through a process of reciprocity which means that the attempt to identify an author function which stabilises the identity of the author and conceives the work as a sincere expression of the individual is a highly contradictory move. The urge for the author to be a whole discrete thing is a mask to put over the riven and always incomplete subject, itself represented in early-twentieth-century works and in the network meanings of the cultural production of the period. Stein becomes the figure of the split, fragmented, unbounded subject in order that this can be excised and replaced with the whole self of the genius.

The aberrant, illegitimate Stein put outside literary history, the Stein who is the exemplar of the finished project of early-twentieth-century literary innovation is assembled in these texts. By making Stein an exceptional figure who exemplifies the avant-garde impulse they wish to take up, the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century arguments of Bernstein, Quartermain and Perloff, take up instead the story

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<sup>42</sup> Riding, *Contemporaries and Snobs*, p.83.

told by the writers who have isolated her. This present-day detachment of Stein from her context, following the logic of the aberrant person of Stein excised from history, keeps her outside her time, making this a consequence of the disjunctive or resistant nature of her writing practice rather than situating it historically as a consequence of these late-1920's position-takings which delegitimise Stein in order to both define and end 'modernism'.

Moreover, in the positing of a radical Stein more authentic than the public persona, the contemporary arguments reveal the same preoccupation as these 1920's revisions – the preoccupation with the authentic author. The fraudulent persona of Stein displaces her practices in the 1920's accounts, and the arguments which have emerged over the last few decades in support of Stein have, paradoxically, continued this division as they attempt to reassert Stein the experimental writer. The division of Stein's work and her persona first emerges in the first review of 'Composition as Explanation' as the gap 'between herself and her creed'. In constructing a 'private' Stein and dismissing the 'public' persona, the recent arguments follow the logic which originates in this literary history: that there is a split between persona and writer, that a persona is a sham and that therefore there is on the other side of this binary a real and legitimate author. The desire for an authentic author is the desire which has removed Stein from history, and it contradicts the very project that Stein was engaged in, alongside many other practitioners in her moment: to trouble the notion of authorship and the apparatus associated with it.

Stein did not refuse to engage with institutions. Those early twentieth century practices, including Stein's, were acts of intervention, moves to act upon institutions, real and conceptual, in order to transform them. Some writers in her period begin to feel the need to consolidate these interventions into a broader conceptualisation – to institutionalise them in turn – and Stein is also engaged in this process herself. Thus, Stein does not resist the institution or exist in a space outside it. She intervenes, and in her interventions she is also engaged in this later project of imagining a coherent institution that might be called 'modernism'.

## Chapter 5

### Gertrude Stein, Conceptual Writer

#### Conceptual writing as twenty-first century avant-garde

The narrative which has Stein as the progenitor for an experimental anti-establishment poetic is now claimed by conceptual writing, a contemporary movement or, as Kenneth Goldsmith puts it, ‘an emerging tendency’, which sees itself as the literary equivalent of conceptual art but also finds its origins in that early phase of modernist literary production which Perloff narrates as the unfinished avant-garde.<sup>1</sup> Goldsmith, a significant proponent of this new poetics, explicitly proposes Stein as a progenitor in his assertion that, ‘Conceptual Writing’s primary influences are Gertrude Stein’s densely unreadable texts, John Cage & Jackson Mac Low’s procedural compositions, and Andy Warhol’s epically unwatchable films’.<sup>2</sup> The list he offers traces a selective genealogy out of modernism through abstract expressionism and pop-art to Language poetry. For Goldsmith, as for the Quartermain and Perloff of the 1992 and 2001 studies, Stein is the survivor of an avant-garde modernism and features as key influence for a writing which wants to inherit its legacy. In Goldsmith’s formulation Stein is an originary figure for conceptual writing, with his term ‘primary’ evoking both significance and genesis. In the light of the shift in the theoretical framing of contemporary experimental poetry from ‘post-modern’ to ‘avant-garde’ accomplished by Perloff in 2001, Goldsmith and the other writers involved in the discourse of this new poetics, including Perloff herself, are now able to stake their own claim on the avant-garde position. Read in Perloff’s *Twenty-first Century Modernism* argument as an unfinished project, the signifier ‘avant-garde’, is now reworked in her more recent book on the conceptual writing movement, *Unoriginal Genius* (2012).<sup>3</sup> Freed from its historical situation by the notion of deferral, the term is now attributable to this new contemporary movement. The concept of deferral also provides for conceptual writers

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p.1. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, ‘Kenneth Goldsmith, Chelsea, Manhattan, Friday: 01.26.07 “I am sitting in a room”’, Dispatch 1: Monday, *Dispatches: Journal* (2007), <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2007/01/journal-day-one/> accessed 17 April 2014. Archived copy of webpage available, [http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/Goldsmith\\_ConceptualWriting.pdf](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/Goldsmith_ConceptualWriting.pdf). See p.2.

<sup>3</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

the possibility of a genealogy of the avant-garde as a history of interruption, in which the notion of a disrupted genealogy paradoxically offers a coherent trajectory. This in turn means it can then be rehistoricised as the alternative literary history which exists outside the institutionalised version.

Indeed, Goldsmith explicitly returns to Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* to establish a parallel between his contemporary moment in poetry and the move to the historical avant-garde phase in visual art. Goldsmith claims in 'Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?' his preface to *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (2011), which he edited with Craig Dworkin, that, 'with the rise of the Web, writing has met its photography'. His claim that there is an equivalence in historical conditions means he can then argue that the present moment in poetry is analogous, has a 'perfect analog-to-analog correspondence', to the transformation in the function of visual art of the late nineteenth century which, in Bürger's narrative, created the conditions for the emergence of the avant-garde in the early twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Goldsmith characterises the emergence of conceptual writing as reflecting the same kind of paradigm-shift as that attributed to visual art in the early twentieth century primarily by drawing a parallel between the effect of the internet on writing and that of photography on visual art:

In 1974, Peter Bürger was still able to make the claim that, "because the advent of photography makes possible the precise mechanical reproduction of reality, the mimetic function of the fine arts withers. But the limits of this explanatory model become clear when one calls to mind that it cannot be transferred to literature. For in literature, there is no technical innovation that could have produced an effect comparable to that of photography in the fine arts." Now there is. (xviii)

There is a problem in Goldsmith's conceptualisation of this contemporary poetic as avant-garde (which this declaration assuredly is), however, and that problem is contained in this claim. Bürger's point is not that literature did not take the same route as visual art, but that the fact that it did suggests there is *more* to the change in the functions of art and literature than just the technological development of photography. Goldsmith shifts the emphasis of Bürger's statement in order to make sense of the contention that his own contemporary poetic is the result of very specific historical conditions as massive in their scope as those which created the conditions for the rupture represented by the avant-garde in the early twentieth century. What Bürger

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, 'Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?' in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* ed. by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), pp.xvii-xxii (p.xvii). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

asserts in his statement, however, is, first, that the advent of photography was *not* the main cause of the change in the status of art in this period and, second, that literature *did* follow the same pattern as visual art in the move to *l'art pour l'art* and the subsequent unfolding of the avant-garde. Therefore, for Bürger, the fact that literature also changed as radically as visual art indicates that something other than the rise of photography lay behind that change.

Goldsmith's declaration rereads Bürger as an argument for the decisive significance of photography in the development of visual art in order to claim the same role for the internet in the development of literature now. The necessity of this reinterpretation reveals the problematic nature of a claim for the avant-garde status of a work of literature written in the early twenty-first century. First, if the conditions which led to the unfolding of the avant-garde one hundred years ago are specific socio-historical conditions – which is really Bürger's point – then they cannot be repeated.<sup>5</sup> Second, if literature, like visual art, was also subject to these conditions, and also changed as a result – again, Bürger's contention here – then the changes claimed for literature now cannot be new in the same way as the historical avant-garde was new: that is, without precedent. Goldsmith must in fact misread Bürger in order to make this assertion. Indeed, Goldsmith's own insistence on Stein as a modernist originator for the new poetic means that it cannot simply be a response to current changes in technology. Bürger's avant-garde represents a total break from tradition and is therefore predicated on and determined by a *lack* of precedent. In other words, the avant-garde work cannot be new, the result of specific historical conditions, and also have a genealogy.

This returns us to the same problem as that represented in Language poetry's claims for Stein. Once again, Stein is displaced from her context as an exception to the historical trajectory of twentieth-century literature in order to make sense of a new avant-garde by putting it outside history. The answer to the question of precedent exemplified in the Language poets' present-tense readings of Stein and in Quartermain's concept of disjunction is to bring Stein forward into the present so as to short-circuit literary history in order to do away with the problem: Stein becomes a

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<sup>5</sup> See Bürger, p.lii: 'Only because my point of departure was that today the avant-garde movements should be seen as historical could I bracket the value judgements that are central to the theories of Lukács and Adorno, and hope to pass beyond the theoretical level they attained'.

contemporary, not a precursor. Goldsmith's answer here is to posit a new avant-garde for writing by seeing historical conditions now as replicating the conditions which caused the unfolding of the original avant-garde in visual art, and thus, essentially, to see Stein as engaging with a set of conditions which had not yet occurred. This reading turns her into a prophetess of the type imagined by her contemporaries in 1927: Stein is avant-garde in the sense that she is ahead of her time and so she cannot be of her time. Once again, Stein, rather than presenting, as we have seen, an integrated and meaningful set of practices and gestures which are absolutely engaged with her time and the other practices around her, is accorded value because she is out of joint with her time. As she has for Mina Loy and Laura Riding, for their own reasons, Stein for Kenneth Goldsmith has value only for the potential future of her practice, a future which Goldsmith says is happening now.

This dislodging of Stein from history also has a value in the discourse of the other escape route from literary history: the characterisation of resistant poetry as a recurrent mechanism or mode. Deployed in the arguments of both Quartermain and Perloff in relation to Language poetry, this notion of mode becomes highly significant in the new poetic. For conceptual writing, the attention to the mode of a text is totalised as the movement's main, and self-consciously realised, function. As conceptual writers Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman note in their 2009 text *Notes on Conceptualisms*, 'The primary focus moves from production to post-production. This may involve a shift from the material of production to the mode of production, or the production of a mode'.<sup>6</sup> In conceptual writing, according to this definition, the attention of the author (and the reader) on the production of the content and form of a work – that is, the writing of a text – is supplanted by an attention to the contexts of production and reception within which the text is deployed. The function of the text is therefore to make explicit those relations and its expression and employment of them. In this activity, conceptual writing as defined by Place and Fitterman attempts to engage explicitly with those institutions which might mediate and contain the work. The action of the conceptual text in its relations with the institutions which mediate its production and reception therefore become its 'meaning'. Conceptual writing is concerned only with the relation of the work to those institutions, and thus is predicated on an overt concern with the *concept* of mode: its subject matter is the idea

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<sup>6</sup> Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms* (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2009), p.16. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

of the place of the work in that system of relations. As Goldsmith explains in his recent book *Uncreative Writing* (2011), the innovation proposed by conceptual writing is in its potential for engaging with and intervening in ‘methods of distribution’, and ‘proposing new platforms of receivership and readership’ (15). This poetic therefore refines the characterisation by the Language poets and their theorists of Stein’s work as representing a resistant ‘mode’ because conceptual writing is ontologically defined by a scepticism about the authorised, hegemonic meanings prescribed and sustained by the ‘establishment’ and its intimate cultural institutions.

Conceptual writing’s emphasis on mode transforms Bourdieu’s notion of the field of cultural production from a description of literary activity into a framework for literary practice. What conceptual writing lays bare is not its own devices but the literary field and its relations with the broader socio-economic landscape. In a further move, however, because of the overarching emphasis on mode, the movement can claim a new avant-garde position whose innovation is the knowledge of the structure of the field, and for whom the new function of the work is to articulate the field itself. In this way, conceptual writing occupies an old position in a new form, and can claim to inherit the position of the early-twentieth-century avant-garde and simultaneously to occupy it in an absolutely new way. It is therefore itself avant-garde because it ruptures the existing paradigm by drawing attention to it, thereby breaking the unspoken rule of collusion: the ‘forgetting’ of the truth of its constructedness which enables a writer to produce work within the paradigm. This forgetting is concisely characterised by Craig Dworkin’s description in ‘The Fate of Echo’, his own preface to *Against Expression*, of the typical contemporary work of poetry as ‘the hundred-thousandth lyric published this decade in which a plainspoken persona realizes a small profundity about suburban bourgeois life’.<sup>7</sup> In Dworkin’s caricature, the very act of writing upholds and obscures those social and cultural constructions the avant-garde seeks to challenge. The lyric form, in particular, is highly problematic for conceptual writing because it presupposes a stable subject position and an authentic voice which speaks of something genuinely felt. This is emphasised by Dworkin’s ironic alliterative overloading of the qualities of this position: ‘plainspoken;’ ‘persona;’ ‘profundity’. His critique of contemporary poetry is a critique of the institutionalised

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<sup>7</sup> Craig Dworkin, ‘The Fate of Echo’, in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* ed. by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), pp.xxiii-liv (p. xxxix). Further references are given after quotations in the text.



position it occupies, reflects and perpetuates, indicated here also by the reference to 'suburban bourgeois life' which signifies the passive assimilation of poetry into the complacent acceptance of the bourgeois worldview and its attendant institutions.

It also signifies, however, the failure of the historical avant-garde movements to successfully challenge the institutions which conceptual writing once again seeks to confront. Looking back to the 'radical' origins of early modernism, these writers have to choose their inheritance carefully, selecting writers or works which have not apparently become subsumed into the 'establishment' tradition they want to reject. The influences they must claim, therefore, must be those which can be read as standing outside the literary history which has culminated in the bourgeois lyric. The literary origins for this movement must be found in writers who have not been legitimised by the institutions within which that lyric functions. In order to make sense as a literary progenitor for a movement which claims a new position of autonomy from those institutions, therefore, it is important that Stein has not been legitimised either by the market or by the academy and the canon these institutions create. The importance of this reading of Stein for conceptual writing cannot be overstated: in order to be an originating influence, Stein's work must occupy a different space to that of the 'establishment' modernism which perpetuates the system of social relations and colludes in its naturalisation. Thus, in order to make sense as a progenitor for this movement, Stein's work must be read as resistant to those key institutions and their processes: the academy, the market, the legitimised literary history and the notions of tradition and canon upon which they rely.

Conceptual writing's claims for Stein, therefore, must be read in terms of the problem which is more or less the same as the problem identified in my discussion of Language poetry in Chapter 1: can conceptual writing have its avant-garde cake and eat it too? That is, can there be an avant-garde which has continued beyond the boundaries of the historical conditions upon which it is predicated? Can the avant-garde be seen as mechanism or a mode of resistance to the institutionalisation of the arts, which resistance, in recurring through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, has formed a robust alternative position? Can this alternative position be said to have escaped the institutionalising forces of the market, the traditional academy, of canonisation, of tradition and of a legitimate genealogy upon which a literary history

is founded, and which, indeed, these writers believe twenty-first century poetry has succumbed to?

### **Stein as an origin for Conceptual Writing**

Conceptual writing restates the argument, proposed by Bernstein in the 1980s and again by Perloff in 2001, that writing in particular has not developed out of the avant-garde origins of the early twentieth century in the same way as visual art. For Goldsmith and Dworkin, the narrative gap after the ‘death’ of avant-garde literature is partly filled in by the history of visual art, in which the move to conceptualism developed out of early modernist practice. Firmly established by the 1960s, conceptual art, according to Dworkin, has ‘continued to mine the seam opened in the mid-1910s by Marcel Duchamp’s readymades’ (xxv). Like Marjorie Perloff, Dworkin argues that the ‘establishment’ literary scene has not continued to mine this seam of modernism as visual art has. As he says

There is no reason to believe that different institutions, even when inter-related like art and literature, would develop at the same pace, but one of the striking differences between these two spheres is the degree to which practices long unremarkable in the art world are still striking, controversial, or unacceptable in the literary arena (xxxix-xl).

This claims that, unlike art, literature has not evolved meaningfully from those radical avant-garde origins, that, indeed, it has forgotten its origins in favour of what Dworkin paraphrases as that ‘hundred-thousandth lyric’ I mentioned earlier. This contention is also echoed by Goldsmith in *Uncreative Writing*, in which he argues that ‘in the art world, since impressionism, the avant-garde has been the mainstream. Innovation and risk taking have been consistently rewarded. But, in spite of the successes of modernism, literature has remained on two parallel tracks, the mainstream and the avant-garde, with the two rarely intersecting’ (13). In the early twenty-first century, then, the two claims set out by the Language poets in the late 1970s are once more reasserted: that mainstream art has developed meaningfully out of modernism whereas literature has not, and that there are two conflicting strands of literary production, the mainstream and the avant-garde.

Conceptual writing’s secondary texts: Vanessa Place and Robert Fittermann’s *Notes on Conceptualisms*, Marjorie Perloff’s *Unoriginal Genius*, Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Uncreative Writing*, and Goldsmith and Dworkin’s *Anthology of Conceptual Writing*,

all refer to Stein as a significant progenitor. In proposing Stein as an antecedent, they can, like the Language poets, return to the scene of the early twentieth century, stake a claim on what Kenneth Goldsmith calls ‘radical modernist ideas’ and trace a lineage which escapes the subsequent institutionalisation of modernist literature (UW 4). Positing Stein’s writing as distinct from modernism in its institutionalised form, much of the value of her work for these writers is founded on the notion that it has qualities which both enable it to resist institutionalisation and make it more appropriate to this moment in its future – the now – than to the unfolded future of ‘establishment’ modernism.

This is a significant context for Place and Fitterman’s reference to Stein in note ‘2d’ from their *Notes on Conceptualisms*:

Sophocles wanted a true language in which things were ontologically nominal. This is true in fiction and history.

Fiction meaning poetry.

Poetry meaning history.

History meaning the future state of having been.

This is the job of Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans* (17).

In this formulation, *The Making of Americans* writes a language which is ‘ontologically nominal’ because the text creates a minute awareness of its own generation of its characters and their histories – its own ‘making’ of them. If the text is ontologically nominal, the only world that exists for the text is the one it has generated: therefore the world it constructs is the only world it knows or refers to, and so it speaks only to and of itself. The function of Stein’s text is to recognise the constitutive power of the history it makes as it makes it. Thus, it is the *recognition* of the ontologically nominal status of fiction and of history, rather than the truth of it, which it is the ‘job’ of *The Making of Americans* to express. This recognition is posited as part of the history of conceptual writing, displaying the development of the consciousness which has enabled it to be written. The future of Stein’s work is the kind of writing this view of the nature and function of the text engenders – that the text is a process which literally calls its own world into being – and it is Stein’s original advance which constitutes the precondition for conceptual writing.

In Place and Fitterman's notes, 'all conceptual writing is allegorical writing' and 'conceptual writing mediates between the written object (which may or may not be a text) and the meaning of the object by framing the writing as a figural object to be narrated' (15). Conceptual writing is 'allegorical' because it calls up ideas or sets ideas in motion through kinds of embodiment, not expressing those ideas in the language itself but in its redeployment of instances of language with attention to their modes of engagement. What is suggested here is that this situation could not have been achieved without the view of the text engendered by Stein's writing – that is, of the text as a self-referential self-constructing entity whose force comes not from its form or its content but from the mode of engagement of which it makes its reader aware. In the case of *The Making of Americans*, the reader is made aware of the process of attempting to construct a history of all the Americans who have ever lived. The text does not tell that impossible history: because it is impossible, it draws attention to the endeavour of telling, and so draws attention acutely to its own making and so to the acts of writing and reading themselves. Place and Fitterman's note defines Stein's text as an aspect of the history of conceptual writing. On these terms, her achievement is the construction of an awareness of what it means to write and to read as action in relation to the cultural constructs which determine writing and reading rather than as a discrete personal activity or metaphysical engagement with meaning.

Place and Fitterman propose Stein as a precursor because of what they see as her exceptional theoretical shift toward the question of the function of writing in relation to established modes of meaning-production – what we might call 'institutions' – as constituting the content and form of the work. Kenneth Goldsmith's claim, about *The Making of Americans* that 'Stein, as usual, was prescient in predicting our reading habits' also has Stein in the role of prophetess, and suggests that she has an exceptional grasp of modernity which means she has anticipated the future which must become conceptual writing.<sup>8</sup> Goldsmith, in *Uncreative Writing*, also indicates that *The Making of Americans* is ahead of its time when he compares it to the internet: 'Trying to read Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* linearly is like trying to

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<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, 'Kenneth Goldsmith, Chelsea, Manhattan, Friday: 01.26.07 "I am sitting in a room"' Dispatch 4: Thursday. *Dispatches: Journal* (2007), <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2007/01/journal-day-four/> accessed 17 April 2014. Archived copy of webpage available, [http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/Goldsmith\\_ConceptualWriting.pdf](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/Goldsmith_ConceptualWriting.pdf). See p.7.

read the Web linearly' (159). Without being explicit, this intimates that Stein's work, as Goldsmith indicates in his introduction to the *Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, constructs the conditions of the twenty-first century before they have occurred.

In anticipating those conditions, Stein then counts as a conceptual writer and her work is therefore a development out of the conditions it predates. Thus, Goldsmith can call Stein's work 'proto-conceptual' (AE xx) and *The Making of Americans* in particular 'a conceptual work, a beautiful proposal that's hard to fulfil' (UW 159). Moreover he, again like the Language poets in the late 1970s, draws Stein into a network of writers by flattening the history which separates them. This is clear in his discussion of *The Making of Americans* alongside Zukofsky's *A* and Craig Dworkin's book *Parse* (again like the Language poets, Goldsmith includes Zukofsky in his lineage): 'While Dworkin could merely have proposed the work – as could Zukofsky or Stein – the realisation of it, the fact of it, gives us something upon which to base our philosophical inquiries...It's a wonderful and very powerful object' (UW 169). Goldsmith confirms the conceptual nature of Stein and Zukofsky's texts by suggesting that they need not have been written, indicating that their main force is as proposals, that is, as concepts. In this way, the three writers are bound together by the very specific category of conceptualism, replacing Language poetry's more nebulous idea of the resistant text and providing a rationale for an account of the avant-garde, reframed as conceptual writing, as separate from mainstream literary history.

### **The Stein name**

The basis for this valorisation of Stein as a trailblazing precursor, however, is very often something other than the form, content, mode or nature of Stein's work. Simply naming or referring to her appears to be as meaningful as reading her work. More often than not conceptual writing's references to Stein come in the form of citation rather than discussion or analysis. In *Uncreative Writing*, Goldsmith notes that 'Dworkin says', of Edwin A Abbott's *How to Parse: An Attempt to apply the Principles of Scholarship to English Grammar*, the source text for his book *Parse* "“When I first came across the book I was reminded of a confession by Gertrude Stein...‘I really do not know that anything has ever been more exciting than diagramming sentences’” (163). This statement appears on the back cover of *Parse*,

connecting it with ‘Stein’ as a name or brand on the commodified surface of his text.<sup>9</sup> Stein is cited as a significant icon in Dworkin’s landscape, but not in the sense that her example and her work are instrumental in the genesis of the conceptual act of producing the text. The memory of Stein’s confession forms in part the impulse for the project, so she does figure in the origin of the text, but only as a rather arbitrary inspiration towards which the text gestures. Because it does not indicate an engagement either with her practice or with her theoretical concerns, the formulation serves to reflect the figure of Stein as something lodged in Dworkin’s mind, a background to his thinking but not an influence on the work itself in any active way. Thus, Stein is in his mind when he conceives of the idea of the text, but she is not an originator of the practice itself. The impulse to claim Stein as a progenitor, as we have seen in Quartermain and Perloff, comes as much from the ‘avant-garde’ aura of provocation and disobedience which surrounds her name as it does from her practice itself.

Kenneth Goldsmith’s text *Gertrude Stein on Punctuation* also claims Stein in the form of citation, this time taking an extract from a text by Stein, her lecture *Poetry and Grammar*, to form the entire content of his own work.<sup>10</sup> Stein’s original lecture, delivered in November 1934 to students at Chicago University, contains a section on punctuation which begins ‘There are some punctuations that are interesting and there are some punctuations that are not’.<sup>11</sup> In this part of the lecture, Stein expresses a contempt for punctuation marks which is both playful and serious: a playful provocation about the function and necessity of punctuation, and a serious challenge to received ideas and unexamined practices. Goldsmith reproduces this section as a discrete text and follows it with a version submitted to a process of erasure, a typical conceptual writing technique, in which he removes all the words and leaves only the punctuation marks used in the printed version of Stein’s lecture. On his title page, Goldsmith puts his own name on Stein’s text:

GERTRUDE STEIN  
ON PUNCTUATION

KENNETH GOLDSMITH.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Craig Dworkin, *Parse* (Berkeley: Atelos, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, *Gertrude Stein on Punctuation* (Newton, N. J: Abaton Books, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Goldsmith, *Gertrude Stein on Punctuation*, p.1.

<sup>12</sup> Goldsmith, *Gertrude Stein on Punctuation*, title page.

He then reproduces the extract from her lecture as his new text, re-titling and re-authoring her work as his own. The work is therefore written now, and by Goldsmith, and this draws Stein into the present just as the Language poets do when they reproduce and discuss her work in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* as one of their own.

In the erased version of the lecture which follows the extract from Stein's text, the words are removed and the punctuation, rather than occurring in the same arrangement as it had in the original, appears scattered around the empty pages. In this form, it no longer functions as punctuation, instead becoming the elements of a pattern arranged by Goldsmith. Thus, in homage to Stein's scepticism about punctuation (what David Crystal calls 'loving-hate') Goldsmith stops the punctuation marks from doing their work and creates out of them something abstract.<sup>13</sup> The fact that his text has the appearance of the punctuation having been flung down on the page also reflects Stein's ambivalence because it gives the impression that he is discarding it (whilst simultaneously retaining it). The commas are scattered amongst the periods, sometimes upside down, sometimes sideways, sometimes the right way up, as if thrown to the wind. This reflects Stein's particular ambivalence about commas, about which in the lecture she says 'I have refused them so often and left them out so much and did without them so continually that I have come finally to be indifferent to them. I do not now care whether you put them in or not'.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in his misaligned placing of them, Goldsmith is careless with commas just as Stein is, reproducing the sensibility she displays. Moreover, this effect cannot be created with periods, which have no right way up, and this aspect of the abstract pattern appears to reflect the greater respect she has for them. For Stein, periods 'have a life of their own a necessity of their own a feeling of their own a time of their own. And that feeling that life that necessity that time can express itself in an infinite variety that is the reason that I have always remained true to periods'.<sup>15</sup> The value and necessity of the period and what Stein later in the lecture calls the 'enfeebling' nature of the comma are therefore both reiterated in Goldsmith's abstraction. Juxtaposed with the scattered commas in their random alignments, the periods seem more solid and consistent,

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<sup>13</sup> David Crystal, *Making a Point: The Pernickity Story of English Punctuation* (London: Profile Books, 2015), p.349.

<sup>14</sup> Goldsmith, *Gertrude Stein on Punctuation*, p.5.

<sup>15</sup> Goldsmith, *Gertrude Stein on Punctuation*, p.4.

whereas the commas look arbitrary and frivolous. His text therefore repeats her scepticism in another form.

In this way, Goldsmith abstracts from Stein's work in order to create an echo of her intention and a restatement of her views. He has changed the text, but it still says the same thing. This presents the text as at some level 'being' what it speaks, and this reads Stein's original remarks on punctuation as having a conceptual function by suggesting that as well as expressing its ideas it also embodies them. This once again draws Stein into a movement which has emerged decades after her death. It also, however, acts as an indication of pure allegiance, a silent reiteration of Stein's text which gestures to her significance but does not attempt to elucidate or substantiate that claim.

Indeed, at times the citation of Stein appears rather forced. In *Uncreative Writing*, Goldsmith offers a critique of contemporary creative-writing teaching practices and the literature associated with them. In the introduction he expresses the view that creative-writing guides 'coerc[e] us to prioritise the theatrical over the mundane as the basis for our writings' and gives an example from the *Complete Idiot's Guide to Creative Writing*: "Using the first-person point of view, explain how a 55-year old man feels on his wedding day. It is his first marriage." Goldsmith argues that he 'prefer[s] the ideas of Gertrude Stein, who...tells of her dissatisfaction with such techniques'. He then quotes *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* in order to show that her view of writing is very different from this: "'She experimented with everything in trying to describe. She tried a bit inventing words but she soon gave that up. The english language was her medium and with the english language the task was to be achieved, the problem solved. The use of fabricated words offended her, it was an escape into imitative emotionalism'" (8). Whilst it is certainly true that Stein would not follow the advice of the creative writing guide he quotes, the evidence Goldsmith supplies to support his preference for Stein's approach is entirely inappropriate. Stein's comment is a dismissal of the use of invented or 'fabricated' words such as those employed for example in the Zaum poetry of Viktor Khlebnikov, and nothing to do with the invention of 'theatrical' narratives in favour of an attention to everyday



life.<sup>16</sup> This enthusiastic misreading of Stein reveals once more that the significance of the allegiance in itself is more important than its substance.

Although it is only a detail, Goldsmith's slip indicates something significant about what Stein represents for this movement and about how she figures in its construction of its own literary history. It suggests that Stein is important as an icon rather than as the example of an originary practice. As we have seen, Stein's work, firmly embedded in the modernist scene of which she was a part, makes its meanings very much in the context of those other practices. The idea posited by Place and Fitterman that Stein's work embodies a shift in modern consciousness of which they are the inheritors must be understood in the light of the embeddedness and inter-relatedness of Stein's work with the other works, gestures and actions around it. That is to say, Stein's practice is by no means exceptional, it is an aspect of a general mode, and therefore in claiming Stein they must claim all those other aspects in the context of which her work made sense. The fact that they consistently isolate Stein as the 'avant-garde' modernist rather than seeing her as the product of her moment reveals that, for them, she means something else, something other than an originating practitioner in whose work they can see the primary impulses of their own. In looking further at her presence in the *Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, it will become clear that Stein is for them not a precursor for a type of practice but, rather, a cypher for the avant-garde position as such.

### **The Anthology of Conceptual Writing: the 'production of a mode'**

Although she is assigned a prominent position in much of the discourse of conceptual writing, Stein's work does not appear in the *Anthology*, despite the inclusion of modernist writers who are not given such exceptional status. Notably, the *Anthology* includes work by Louis Aragon and Tristan Tzara, writers who fit more neatly into the category of historical avant-garde movements identified by Peter Bürger who, as we have seen, Goldsmith quotes in his introduction. Stein's name appears a number of times in the *Anthology*, however, in the introduction and in the preambles which introduce each writer's work. In contrast to *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, the *Anthology* points to Stein without including or engaging with the work itself. This

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<sup>16</sup> It is interesting in the light of Stein's dismissal of the techniques of Zaum to note that Marjorie Perloff cites Khlebnikov as, like Stein, an example of 'avant-garde' modernism.

represents once again an example of empty reference – Stein is there in name only. As in Foucault's late 60's formulation, Stein's name comes to represent a pure 'author function' without even the content of the work her name would signify. This is problematic in that it has a version of Stein which is ideological and unexamined, and she becomes in this treatment a canonical figure, and therefore subject to one of the processes of institutionalisation which conceptual writing seeks to resist – or at least to complicate. Indeed, the canon is one of the primary forms of modernist institutionalisation which these late twentieth and early twenty-first century 'post-modern' and 'avant-garde' movements identify and critique.

The marking of Stein as a canonical figure is also achieved in the form of the references to her in the preambles. In the introduction to Christopher Knowles's 1979 'Typings' the work is described as 'a pop-infused update to Steinian concerns' (327). The adjective 'Steinian' in itself indicates the category of the canon. Using her name as an adjective ascribes to it the status of denotation and therefore assumes for it a defined and permanent signification. Stein as an emptied 'author function' is also a set of expectations, a brand. At times the references seem particularly throwaway, indicating a 'nod' in Stein's direction which appears to function solely to reinforce a shared sensibility. The preamble to the extract from Ariana Reines's text 'The Cow', which intersperses quotations from a government review of carcass disposal with the poet's exploration of the relations between language and violence, ends with a reference to Stein: 'As Gertrude Stein wrote in *Tender Buttons* (Paris: Claire Marie, 1914): "out of an eye comes research, out of selection comes painful cattle"' (508). The parallel drawn between Reines's text and Stein's is entirely arbitrary, predicated on a random semantic echo in the words 'research', 'painful' and 'cattle' which connects the texts in the mind of the editor. Devoid of any substantive comparison, this reference simply performs the function of an 'in-joke' which draws together those in the know. This serves to encourage an exclusive group mentality of the type explored by Stein in 'The 15<sup>th</sup> of November', the text which critically inhabits the phrase 'enough said' in order to draw out the inherent violence of its inclusionary and therefore its exclusionary force.

The discussion of the Wiener Gruppe, a small poetry movement in the Vienna of the 1950s and 60s, however, offers a more explicitly historicised reference to Stein:

the Vienna Group looked to the most radical prewar poets for inspiration: Gertrude Stein, Paul Scheerbart, and Kurt Schwitters, who, as Rhum states, “if known at all, were hardly taken note of and dismissed as outsiders who had been deservedly forgotten. For us they represented the rediscovered, true traditions with which our poetic linked up organically. From where else should we proceed if not from the so-called ‘end-points’?” (569)

This is significant in its echo of conceptual writing’s position, and it is interesting firstly that Gerhard Rhum is quoted so fully in this respect and secondly that Stein is once again figured as ‘most radical’. The narrative that conceptual writing adopts has strong parallels with Rhum’s statement: the need to develop that which has lain undeveloped in twentieth century, that which has not become an aspect of mainstream culture, and to continue a history out of those read as marginalised or illegitimate works. This is important for conceptual writing because it wants, perhaps in all senses of the word, to *occupy* the position of the marginal, the illegitimate, in its desire to challenge hegemonic institutions and cultural mainstreaming.

This is meaningful in the practice of conceptual writing if it is explicit, that is, if the lineage which includes Stein is explicitly selected from history as a conceptual project, and if the construction of a genealogy is foregrounded *as* a construction, a practice rather than the documentation of a natural process or the uncovering of a truth hitherto obscured. Indeed, the genealogy proposed by an anthology can in itself be seen as a conceptual work: the realising of a concept rather than the reification of a canon or the institutionalisation of a movement. Craig Dworkin’s 2012 *A Handbook of Protocols for Literary Listening*, for example, is a pamphlet which engages with the practice of the anthology in just such a manner.<sup>17</sup> Composed of a selection of literary texts reflecting an engagement with sound, the anthology listens to the texts which listen, and in this self-reflexive practice it is a work in itself generated around the concept of listening. This self-reflexivity is reflected in the preface, in which Dworkin seeks to ‘re-imagine’ the practice of listening as a kind of ‘survey’ which transfers ‘the survey’s modes of attention to the aural realm’. The *Handbook* is, therefore, as an attempt to map the ways in which the texts themselves ‘formally examine the sonic conditions’, a survey of texts which themselves are engaged in a survey: it listens to writers listening. Moreover, Dworkin’s caveat, that his survey is ‘suggestive rather than exhaustive’ and ‘not an encyclopaedia of practices’ is emphatic about the status of the anthology as a temporary and contingent selection

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<sup>17</sup> Craig Dworkin, *A Handbook of Protocols for Literary Listening* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2012).

rather than a definitive one.<sup>18</sup> The preface, therefore, lays bare the devices of selection and combination which have shaped the anthology and the principle upon which they are grounded, and insists upon the tentative nature of those choices. In this way, it is indeed a conceptual text in its own right, engaging explicitly with its own mode and foregrounding the conceptual basis of its own content, form and function.

The production of an anthology which constructs a literary history and an attendant genealogy is a more problematic proposition, however, particularly if the foregrounding or laying bare of the element of choice and its contingency are compromised. In his preface to *Against Expression*, Goldsmith's reversal of the notion of historical precedent, in which Stein is read as if she anticipated the future of conceptual writing and is therefore ahead of her time because that future was inevitable and the correct unfolding of history, already proposes a conception of an alternative literary history which occludes the element of choice. This conception is also reflected in Craig Dworkin's assertion in his preface to the *Anthology* that literature has not developed meaningfully from its 'radical' modernist origins. These formulations belie Place and Fitterman's careful note that history is a form of poetry, that is, a formal selection and placing of elements which generates meaning: a composition.

Because an anthology, as just such a composition, is by definition selective, it is also an agent of the destructive practices of exclusion or elimination which are inevitable aspects of that selection process. In order to construct a story of literary inheritance – a genealogy – or to define a movement or a period, it must select and combine particular writers and legitimise particular poetic practices, and therefore it must exclude and marginalise others. The anthology has often functioned as the conduit through which a canon and a chronology are authorised in the construction of a dominant version of literary history. But it can also be a creative force, a medium for the productive possibilities of curation, composition, and assemblage. Indeed, one of the key functions of the anthology in recent times has been the recuperation of marginalised writers.<sup>19</sup> As one of the major forces involved in the construction of a story of literary history, then, the anthology presents a significant tension.

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<sup>18</sup> Dworkin, *Handbook*, p.3.

<sup>19</sup> Prime examples of this are Bonnie Kime Scott's *The Gender of Modernism* (see Introduction note 26) and its 'sequel' *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections*, ed. by Bonnie

This tension is, however, dealt with directly in the *Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. It explicitly attempts to resist the authorising, naturalising tendency whilst simultaneously attempting to draw what Dworkin calls 'emerging literary tendencies today' into a coherent category. In establishing the terms of this anthology, Dworkin's introductory essay 'The Fate of Echo' engages overtly with the problem of the anthology per se. Recognising that 'the paratext always suggests a perspective from which to read', Dworkin explicitly takes hold of the paratextual apparatus of his own anthology and presents it as the embodiment of a self-conscious argument rather than as the record of an organic, natural occurrence (xxiv).<sup>20</sup> He is also concerned that, in resistance to the reifying potential of the anthology, his anthology does not represent a definitive statement or a definitive canon. He makes it clear, therefore, that the emphasis is on the curatorial, compositional function rather than the authorising or legitimising function. As he explains, the *Anthology* is an extension of the online *UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, whose 'curatorial premise', is to 'look beyond received histories' (xxiv).<sup>21</sup> This anthology is therefore particularly significant because it is presented as an overt attempt to construct a story for itself, in a self-conscious engagement with both the problem of the anthology's authority and the problem of the literary canon with which it is so often entangled.

This claim to a curatorial function, as in Dworkin's *Handbook*, appears to get around the problem of the anthology's authority by treating it as a loose and temporary assemblage which is in itself a part of the emergence of the category, rather than a conclusive and legitimate record of this emergence after the fact. Indeed, Dworkin characterises his own activity as 'assembling the present collection' (xli). Moreover, in using the term 'emerging', as Goldsmith also does in *Uncreative Writing*, Dworkin

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Kime Scott (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007) which expands the remit further to enable the study of modernism's 'various neglected themes and questions' and 'demonstrate both the value and the complexity of gender as a locus for fielding issues of political activism, cultural production, performance and diverse identity formation on a global stage'. For a discussion of the anthology as vehicle for an 'alternative' poetics excluded from the modernist canon see Marjorie Perloff, 'Whose New American Poetry? Anthologizing in the Nineties', *Diacritics* 26: 3, 104-123 (1996).

<sup>20</sup> See Gerard Genette, *Paratext: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp 1-2 'the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public... It is... as Philippe Lejeune put it, "a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text." Indeed, this fringe, always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author, constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy'.

<sup>21</sup> See <http://www.ubu.com/concept/>

denotes a mysterious, unpredictable, perhaps even ‘quasi-irrational’ process over which the anthology has no influence. As Dworkin says,

This anthology documents the explosion of publications since the turn of the millennium under the sign of the conceptual...one of the reasons for this collection is to offer a snapshot of an instant in the midst of an energetic reformation, just before the mills of critical assessment and canonical formation have had a chance to complete their first revolutions (xliv).

In other words, the anthology seeks to recognise the category without fixing it: that is, without contributing to its institutionalisation. Dworkin’s language here – ‘Snapshot’ ‘instant’ ‘midst’ ‘energetic’ – suggests it is not composed: rather, that it is an immediate, almost unmediated capture of a phenomenon as it moves. And it defines itself against the activity of canonisation in the image of the ‘mills’ which are in contrast weighty, destructive and inexorable, and which produce something different from the original practices which are ground in the revolution of their stones.

The anthology as such is, however, defined by the activities of selection and combination which so inevitably create the kind of closed and authorising paradigm Dworkin wishes to reject. Because this is in the nature of the mode, Dworkin’s desire to present a seemingly unmediated record of these tendencies serves only to underplay the activity of selection and combination with which the anthologist must necessarily engage. Indeed, I would argue that rather than foregrounding and laying bare these choices and their implications, the composition of this anthology in fact serves only to obscure them.

### **Paratext in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing***

These underlying patterns are obscured in the text in particular because of its deployment and foregrounding of a number of paratextual devices which are there to enact the argument offered in the introductory essays (that this anthology is an assemblage, is a temporary act of curation). First, each work is introduced with those preambles, each of which represents an argument for the work’s inclusion, a statement about why the text can be identified as belonging to the category ‘conceptual writing’. For example, the first preamble runs thus: ‘[Monica] Aasprong’s work takes a minimalist trajectory of concrete and visual poetry – from Stephane Mallarme to E.E. Cummings to Aram Saroyan – to new and extreme limits while at the same time taking concerns of visually based minimalism into the sphere of the page’ (3). This

follows the spirit of the anthology as an argument for an emerging movement, in that it describes Aasprong's work by referring to some of conceptual writing's practices and precedents, previously identified in the introductory essays. This presents the anthology and the inclusion of this example as simply a suggestion about how these practices might be drawn together; explicitly as a working hypothesis rather than a definitive statement. This is augmented by both the casual listing of other potentially 'conceptual' writers and the fact that they are in parenthesis, which devices both provide the feeling of a temporary assembly of comparable practices. These techniques are employed in almost all the preambles, implying that the selections in the anthology are not fixed, definitive or authoritative. In this way, the *Anthology* seeks to resist the institutionalisation of both the canon and the academy, the two institutions evoked in Dworkin's wish to evade 'canonical formation' and 'critical assessment'.

Along with the 'curatorial premise' proposed by the preambles, a number of other prominent paratextual devices are deployed in order to counteract other institutionalising forms or processes. First, the anthology is organised by author in alphabetical order. This creates a levelling effect because it randomises the process of combination. In this way, it appears to have been taken out of their hands, suggesting that they have not arranged the names in significant ways – either to canonise particular authors, or to suggest any prominent coteries or significant relationships. Second, there is no indication in the contents page of the dates on which the texts were published or when the authors were – or are – writing. As anthologies are often organised chronologically, the absence of even an indication of chronological relationship becomes an overt declaration of resistance to the logic of development and the related activity of periodisation. In other words, it is a refusal to offer a genealogical account of the category. In the baldest interpretation, the contents page embodies a refusal to engage with literary history at all, providing instead a decontextualized field of works connected only by their relevance to the category of 'conceptual writing'. Because these authors are presented in a vacuum, stateless, timeless, divested of any other means of determination, we are left with only with their names.

This seems therefore to corroborate Dworkin's intention to offer a loose and unmediated assemblage, presenting a collection of undifferentiated texts not subject to

the institutionalising processes of periodisation or canonisation. There are so many writers here, and so many more are mentioned in the preambles, that the initial impression is of a levelling inclusiveness determined only by a general category. This looks like an equalising field constructed – or deconstructed – out of a flattening of both history and hierarchy. These compositional devices, however, serve in effect to hide the other rationales and processes involved in the selection and combination of texts, and these are revealed in other ways of reading the text which looks both beneath and beyond those devices which are foregrounded. Despite these devices and the argument they support, the *Anthology* does have a literary genealogy grounded in the notions of period and canon it seeks to resist.

Turning to some of the newer methodologies, made possible by the development and availability of digital quantitative data processing, it is possible to examine those other, less overt paratextual features which mediate the reader's engagement with the writers and the texts in the anthology and which in more oblique ways construct a representation of conceptual writing as a movement. Methods involving data analysis for the study of literary texts first emerged in the 1960s at Cambridge and have since then grown much – though very gradually – in their scope and popularity.<sup>22</sup> These quantitative methods have been deployed in modernist studies in many forms, for example in Bonnie Kime Scott's 1990 *The Gender of Modernism*, and more recently by researchers on the Modernist Journals Project.<sup>23</sup>

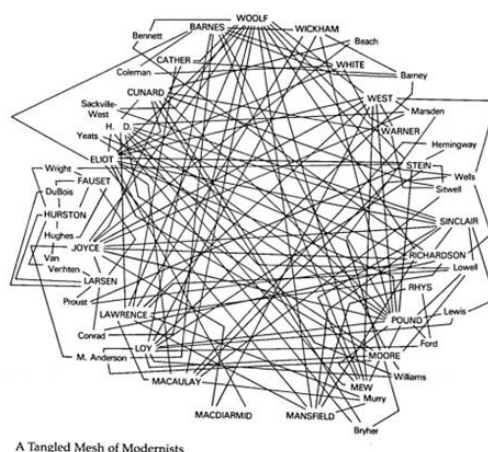


Figure 2: Bonnie Kime Scott, 'A Tangled Mesh of Modernists'.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> For a concise historiography, see Kenneth M. Price and Ray Siemens, 'Introduction', in *Literary Studies in the Digital Age: An Evolving Anthology* (New York: Modern Languages Association: 2013), <https://dlsanthology.commons.mla.org/introduction/>. See Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (London: Verso, 2005), pp.67-92 for an influential example of this method for literary studies.

<sup>23</sup> <http://modjourn.org/>, a joint project of Brown University and The University of Tulsa.

<sup>24</sup> Kime Scott, *The Gender of Modernism*, p.10.



Such analysis is most often used either to trace the underlying patterns in individual texts, as in Antonia and McKenna's study of interior monologue in Joyce's *Ulysses*, or alternatively on a broader scale to trace the changes in a particular genre or journal over time, or to map the networks of relations – between writers or of texts – in a given period.<sup>25</sup> Kime Scott's network of modernist relations, for example, in which Stein figures prominently, served to underscore the significant roles of women on the modernist scene (fig. 2). More recently, Tanya E Clement's work on *The Making of Americans* used data plotting tools to investigate the nature and function of repetition in Stein's text (fig. 3).<sup>26</sup>

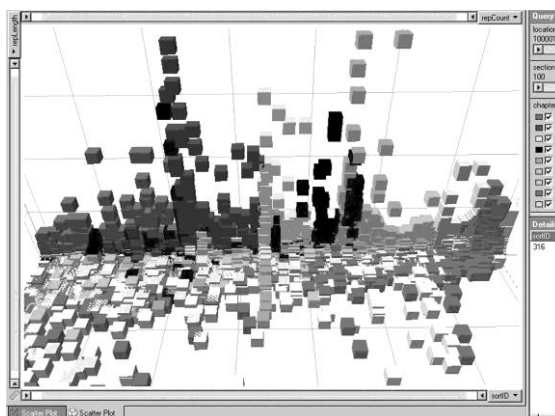


Figure 3: Tanya E Clement, 'Repetition plotted on 3D scatter plot'.<sup>27</sup>

In considering the role of *Against Expression* in shaping the representation of conceptual writing as a literary mode with a literary history, both these functions of data analysis are relevant. *Against Expression* is a text, and so a dataset can be gathered from the paratextual apparatus – the introductory essays and the preambles to each text – in order to capture the underlying patterns created by the frequency, placing and juxtaposition of author's names, which are not available at a single reading but would rather emerge more gradually over repeated and variable engagements with the text. Put simply, the more times an author's name is mentioned, the more likely it is the reader will come across that name, and so the more significant that author will seem to be. Further, the more names with which that name is associated, the more they will be read as a prominent influence, nodal point, or typical

<sup>25</sup> Wayne McKenna and Alexis Antonia, "'A Few Simple Words' of Interior Monologue in *Ulysses*: Reconfiguring the Evidence', *Lit Linguist Computing* 11: 2 (1996), 55-66.

<sup>26</sup> Tanya E. Clement, 'A thing not beginning and not ending': using digital tools to distant-read Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*', *Lit Linguist Computing* 23: 3 (2008), 361-381.

<sup>27</sup> Clement, p.372.

practice – given that the preambles draw together references to ‘like’ practices. Thus, the analysis works at the level of the text, just as the studies of Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Stein’s *The Making of Americans* do. This form of analysis really replicates the function of techniques of close reading by revealing what the reader might grasp but not ‘know’. This is the function of enabling an understanding of how the text creates its effects by reading with a closer and more methodical attention than the narrative or form of the text at first seems to encourage. In the case of quantitative analysis, the close attention of the individual reader is replaced by the digital attention of a reading machine. Both, nonetheless, perform the same function: to read the text in a way which provides evidence of how it works at the level of reading it seems to require the reader to access it at, something which cannot fully be known at that level. In the analysis of the *Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, the patterns of repetition and juxtaposition of author’s names creates an effect – that the reader is encouraged to ‘know’ that some writers are more influential or significant than others, but without being made explicitly aware of this effect or its techniques.

More than simply providing data for how the text works, however, this method can also be used, in this instance, on the broader scale represented by Kime Scott’s plot of modernist associations.<sup>28</sup> Because the *Anthology* constructs a series of associations between authors, and because it seeks to represent the emergence of a literary movement over time, the data can also be used to draw a map of the history and the literary network it constructs. Plotting the frequency of names mentioned can form a picture of the relative significance of individual authors for this movement, assuming that the authors which are mentioned most are signified as most important or influential, and plotting the patterns formed by the conjunctions or intersections of author’s names can provide a picture of the network of relations the *Anthology* creates. This addresses the problem of positivism associated with the collection of empirical data: this method, rather than representing the objective ‘truth’ of the emergence of this movement, seeks, rather, to quantify how this movement sees itself, how it wishes to be understood, what it values, how it operates.

### **Visualising the hidden paratext**

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<sup>28</sup> And in the instance of any anthology which contains preambles like these.

First, it is possible, by reinstating the chronology the *Anthology* avoids, to trace the ways in which this new avant-garde attaches itself to a quite traditional reading of literary periods. In visualising the data gathered from the introductory essays and preambles as a graph which has a timeline as the *x* axis, it becomes clear that there is a pattern generated by the clustering of inclusions (fig.4). Looking at the spread of the works included as examples of conceptual writing over 10 year blocks from 1900 to 2010, we can see that the anthology expresses an underlying periodization in the clusters of associations around particular moments in a chronology. With the inclusions proliferating around the 1910s and 20s, again around the 1960s, and with another surge in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, it restates the boundaries of modernism, of pop art, and of post-modernism, and so the examples of conceptual writing gather around literary moments already considered significant in the genealogy of the avant-garde posited by the Language poets and by Marjorie Perloff. In this way, the anthology serves to reinforce the narrative of an interrupted or resurgent avant-garde already proposed, and presents a literary genealogy in order to assert the legitimacy of the movement.

It also reveals that, in the construction represented by the *Anthology*, whilst the literary history of conceptual writing manifests as fluctuation or interruption, the general trajectory is that of growth. The sense of a burgeoning movement is implied because, with each example of ‘resurgence’, the number of works included increases, indicating an increase in the number of writers engaged in conceptual writing over time. In the contemporary resurgence, the number of writers occupying the same position is so great that on the graph it appears as a tangled knot of names. Despite its interrupted trajectory, therefore, it provides a developmental model of evolutionary proliferation from a limited primary manifestation: from, as it were, an original ‘parent’. The movement’s avant-garde credentials are provided by legitimising historical figures, among whom Stein is prominent. This underlying formation legitimises the movement through a pattern of precedent and heredity and suggests an evolutionary model of proliferation in which a successful ‘species’ multiplies over time from a single base.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> In order to provide a picture of as much of the data as possible on a single chart, in Figure 4, Mallarmé (1874) and Diderot (1796), the two earlier authors, are not included. Moreover, because they are single representatives of their own moments, they appear more as rogue elements, originals rather than originators, and so not drawn into a literary genealogy as precursors in the same way as Stein, who is located as the signifier of the ‘avant-garde’ phase of literary modernism.

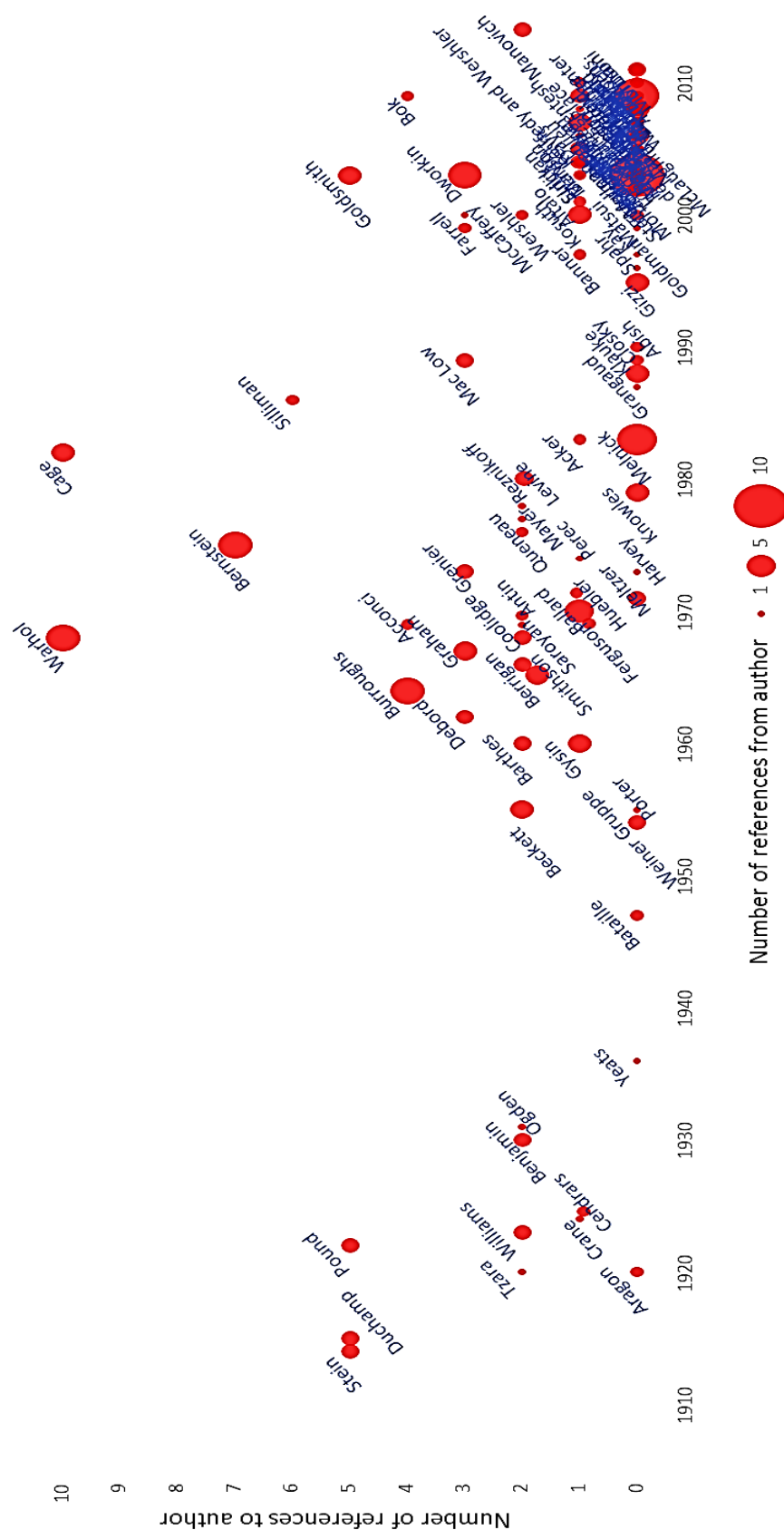


Figure 4: References to and from authors in 'Against Expression: The Anthology of Conceptual Writing'.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Produced in collaboration with Amy Macdougall, PhD student, Medical Statistics, National Heart and Lung Institute, Imperial College University of London.

What is problematic here is that, because it is only an underlying aspect of the text's composition, obscured as it is by the alphabetical order of the author's names rather than the chronological order of the works themselves, it is not attended to directly, meaning that the assertion is taken as read rather than presented as an active and conscious choice. It is also important to note that the cluster around modernism reflects only its early phase, and so this narrative also reflects Marjorie Perloff's history of a modernist avant-garde repressed early in the twentieth century only to resurface in the form of select 'postmodern' inheritors. What is added here is a greater emphasis on the history of conceptual art with the inclusion of artworks which use language as their medium and which had not hitherto been considered as poetry or as the inheritance of a modernist poetic – notably the work of Warhol and Cage. This plot also reveals the function of the term 'conceptual' in the retelling of literary history: as a stand-in for the troublesome, either too precise or too nebulous category 'avant-garde'. If all these works and the names associated with them can be re-categorised as conceptual, then the history of avant-garde writing is in this representation the history of conceptual writing.

This construction of an alternative strain of literary history is also further obscured by the suggestion that the editors have looked back at the whole history of writing and found a unifying category which differentiates some texts from others. This categorisation of the conceptual, because it is both abstract and general, means that in this reading the texts appear to escape all other categories and are no longer defined by literary periodisation or by their place in a canon. This is most apparent when, towards the end of his introductory essay, Dworkin claims that 'particular techniques and devices – such as appropriation or transcription, however novel they may seem – have always had precedents' and that 'the figure of the uncreative writer is hardly new'. Citing Ovid, the Bible, Cervantes, Flaubert and Gogol, Dworkin proposes conceptual writing as a neutral category which stands outside time and so can apply to any time. For him, this means that it provides a way of understanding how the text reflects its time because each use of the mode can be read in relation to its moment, and 'their meaning simply changes with the cultural moment in which they are deployed (context, again, is all to the point)' (xlv).

Dworkin's claim for conceptual writing requires once again the problematic narrative of a disrupted literary history: Dworkin effectively replaces Quartermain's category of

recurring resistance or disjunctiveness and Perloff's revised category of the deferred avant-garde with the category of the conceptual. Indeed, Dworkin's elaboration of the conceptual here means it comes very close to Eliot's 1919 notion of innovation: a recurrent mode which replaces the previous eternal classification of the beautiful with another timeless category which can transcend time and is therefore relevant for all times. Thus, in the same manner in which Eliot's category of innovation can be seen as an aspect of the institutionalisation of modernism, the category of the conceptual, proposed in this way, seems potentially much compromised in its resistance to the institutionalisation it seeks to avoid.

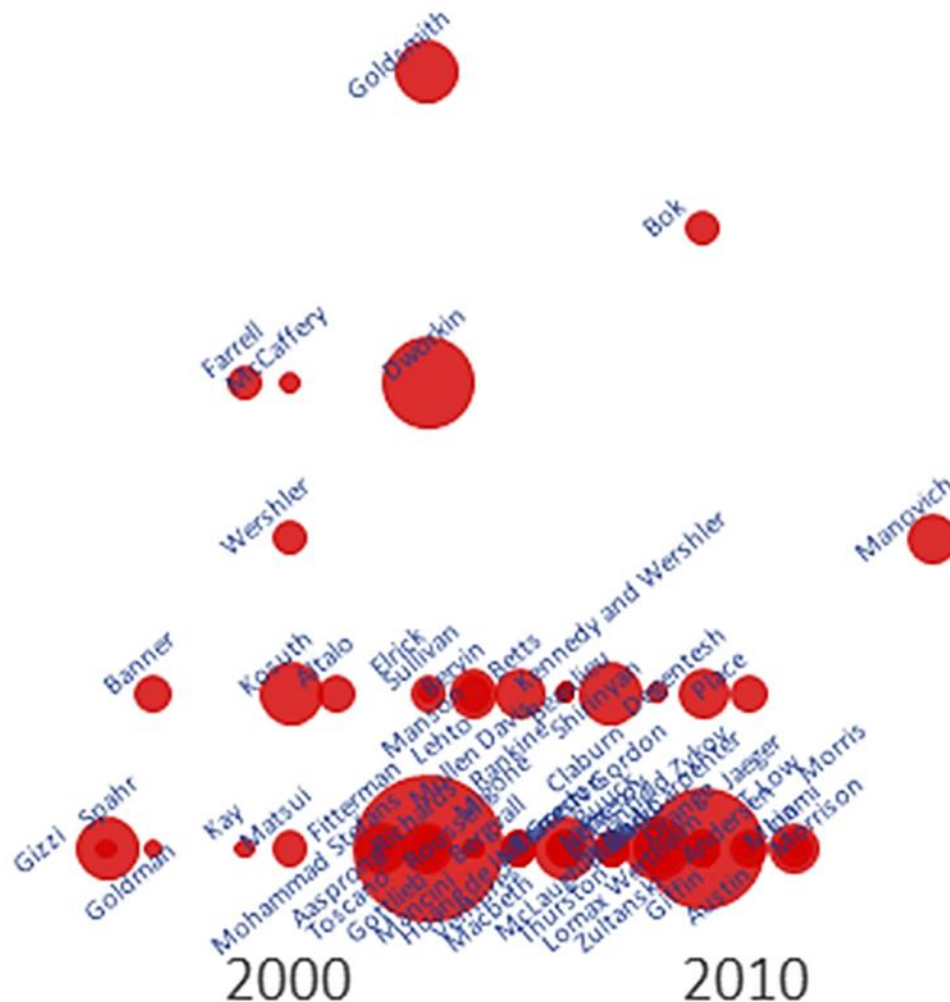
A closer look at the ways in which the names are deployed also provides another understanding of the way in which the hidden paratext creates an underlying genealogy. On the same chart, the y axis indicates the number of times the author is referred to in the anthology as a whole (fig. 4). This means that the higher the point is, the greater the number of references to the author in the anthology. Thus, Andy Warhol and John Cage are the highest points on the chart, having 10 and 9 mentions respectively. In addition to this, the size of the point on the chart reflects the number of other authors referred to in the particular writer's preamble.<sup>31</sup> David Melnick's preamble, for example, mentions David Antin, Walter Benjamin, Andy Warhol, Steve, McCaffery, Charles Bernstein and Ron Silliman. In these other details, which reflect two different kinds of significance accorded by the way the names occur in the anthology, a further indicator of the evolutionary logic of the *Anthology* can be discerned. The number of times an author is mentioned (their level on the y axis) suggests the level of influence they exert, and the relative size of the points (denoting the number of other writers associated with that author) suggests their role as a conduit or connector of like practices, a drawing in rather than a handing down. These two kinds of relations come very close to notions of kinship, with the influencers ascending the y axis reflecting a 'parental' role as originals whose traces appear on

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<sup>31</sup> Stein's name is in the introductory essays rather than in a preamble (because her work is itself is not included in the anthology), so it appears here in a form which reflects that. Each author included in the introductory essays is given two extra 'points' to reflect the 'fraternal' connection this provides to all the other authors in the introductions and the significance this affords them. Stein, Pound and Duchamp are all mentioned in the introductory essays. Neither Stein nor Pound feature in the anthology itself, so they do not have preambles, and although an excerpt from Duchamp's 'notes' is included, no other author is mentioned in his preamble. The names of these three writers, therefore, are the same size. This reflects the fact that they are all included in the introductions whilst not being directly linked with other authors through their own preambles.

many other works, and the bigger connector figures ascribed a ‘fraternal’ function in drawing together like practices.

A closer look at the twenty-first century corner of the chart reveals a proliferation of connecting figures over time (fig. 5).



*Figure 5: Twenty-first century positions on the field.*

This part of the chart, with its greater number of larger, ‘fraternal’ points, for example K. Silem Mohammad, whose preamble mentions 9 other authors, shows that the anthology, in presenting the contemporary movement it identifies, also ratifies that movement by connecting the twenty-first century writers it names to each other and to the other authors in the literary genealogy it constructs. Most of the recent figures are situated low in the field, a reflection of the fact that many of them are mentioned only once or twice in the anthology as a whole. Two figures emerge from this scrum, however, distinguished by height and size and so being both mentioned more than

other contemporary writers and connected to more of them: Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin. In Dworkin and Goldsmith's underlying genealogy, Stein is located as the literary originator of conceptual writing in earnest and the beginning of its proliferation, and they are its significant inheritors.

What the charting of this data shows is an underlying evolutionary logic in conceptual writing's literary history, and this is a logic which is also implicit in the prefatory essays themselves. This principle, in fact, hails us in the opening paragraph of the *Anthology*. Kenneth Goldsmith's introductory essay begins with this observation:

There is a room in the Musée d'Orsay that I call the room of possibilities. The museum is roughly set up chronologically, and you happily wend your way through the nineteenth century until you hit this one room that is a group of about a half a dozen painterly responses to the invention of the camera. One that sticks in my mind is a trompe l'oeil solution in which a painted figure reaches out of the frame into the viewer's space. Another incorporates three-dimensional objects into the canvas. Great attempts, but as we all know, impressionism won out (xvii).

This narrative figures the history of visual art as an evolutionary struggle in which

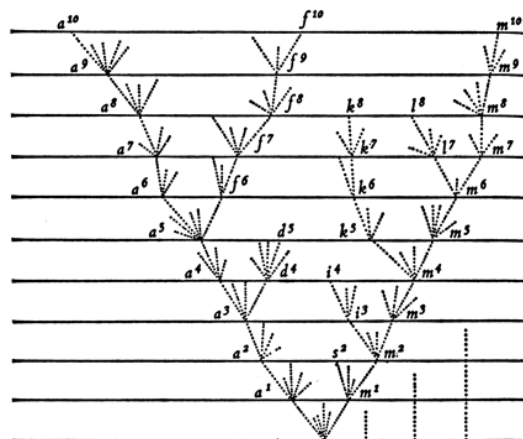


Figure 6: Darwin's branching diagram of phylogeny.<sup>32</sup>

some species fail and some succeed. The failed 'solution[s]' in Goldsmith's representation take on the quality of alternative evolutionary strains – the unfulfilled 'possibilities', as 'attempts' which have not been meaningfully incorporated into the living culture. This follows the branching model of Darwin's tree diagram explicating the theory of the 'Divergence of character', in which failed mutations halt here and there as dead ends along the trajectory of species adaptation (fig.6).

<sup>32</sup> Charles Darwin, *Origin of Species* (London: Dent 6<sup>th</sup> ed., 1872. Reprinted in Everyman's Library, 1958), p.120.



Indeed, the examples Goldsmith describes are assigned the static quality of fossilised specimens, arrested in time: the figure which ‘reaches out’ and the objects painted ‘into the canvas’. Significantly, the fact that the painters are not named condemns them further into extinction. They are relevant only as examples of what no longer exists: we would never have heard of them, and so their names mean nothing. Goldsmith’s story also transposes a Darwinian logic of adaptation: these examples could not adapt to the environmental changes, failed to respond successfully to conditions and so died out. Impressionism, on the other hand, is the right adaptation and so in ‘won out’. The story of what fails and what succeeds also naturalises a narrative of capitalist competition as the way things fall out if left to develop naturally, but it belies – even denies – the issue of the power of those very institutions this anthology seeks to challenge in shaping and mediating what survives and what goes extinct in literary history.

This story about visual art reflects the anthology’s preoccupation with chronology, with the writing of its own literary history, and with the evolutionary logic which both legitimises its practices and naturalises its claim as the appropriate form for twenty-first-century literary production. Indeed, in the discussion of contemporary literature this narrative sets up, the Darwinian model of adaptation is taken as read in Goldsmith’s assertion that ‘writing needs to redefine itself to adapt to the new environment of textual abundance’ (xvii). Not only does this model naturalise a version of literary history and claim it as the inevitable result of unmediated processes, it also contradicts the practice of recuperation for which Raymond Williams called, and to which the Language poets’ recuperation of Stein responded. Following the Darwinian model, practices which die out do so because they have not successfully adapted, and their extinction is the result of their unfitness for purpose. Understood in terms of this rationale, Stein’s work, like the work of the failed nineteenth-century painters, went extinct in the mid-twentieth century because it did not represent a successful response to the conditions of her era. This makes Stein a failed mutation, which in Darwin’s diagram means her work is the end of a genetic line and thus irrecoverable. The very fact that a work of art or literature can be recovered in the way Stein’s has, and in the way in which, for example, the activity of Bonnie Kime Scott recovers the work of other women modernists, shows us that literary history is no more natural than capitalism.

Opening as it does with a reference to its logic: ‘this book has its origins in the *UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing*’, the narrative of evolution and adaptation also underlies Dworkin’s prefatory argument that ‘there is no reason to believe that different institutions, even when interrelated like art and literature, would develop at the same pace’ (xxiii; xl). The narrative of development is here taken as read, and the presupposition that development is an unambiguous model for literary history is used to support the view that the literary world’s failure to embrace conceptualism is evidence of its lack of development. Moreover, Dworkin deploys the imagery of procreation in his definition of the anthology’s remit: ‘this anthology documents the explosion of publications since the turn of the millennium under the sign of the conceptual, and it attests to the literary energy of uncreative practices currently orbiting in swarms about these two terms’ (xliv). This language evokes narratives of species ‘explosion’, and of genetic reproduction, figured in the image of egg and sperm cells, contributing to the sense of an underlying evolutionary logic. Whilst Dworkin claims to be presenting an unmediated and temporary ‘snapshot’ of a contemporary movement in action, what the *Anthology* provides is much more a literary history for an established and significant movement in twentieth- and twenty-first-century writing, a legitimising genealogy and a model of development.

The problem with an evolutionary model for the avant-garde is not just that it sits very uncomfortably alongside the key notions – of rupture, disjunction and resistance to tradition – with which it is identified. It is also problematic because it legitimises a particular movement by making it seem like the natural and inevitable end-point of a progression. This is an organic, naturalising narrative of the kind Leonard Diepeveen, in his 2004 essay on modernist anthologies, ‘When did modernism begin? Formulating boundaries in the modern anthology’, ascribes to the most conservative examples. Diepeveen points out that the process of reification is particularly allied to those representations which offer an organic narrative in order to naturalise a story of modernism. Diepeveen suggests that ‘One major way of understanding modernism as a narrative was to think organically, a mode of conceptualising which would enable the boundaries of this book [i.e. the anthology] to seem natural’.<sup>33</sup> He also points out that this technique is ‘used much more aggressively by conservatives than by

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<sup>33</sup> Leonard Diepeveen ‘When Did Modernism Begin? Formulating Boundaries in the Modern Anthology’ *ESC* 30: 1 (March 2004), 137-156 (p.149). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

radicals', in order to represent a particular version of modernism as emerging from 'unselfconscious processes of cause and effect that result in states of affairs that could not be any other than what they are' (150-151). Thus, the conservative modernist anthology uses an organic representation of literary development – as evolution or growth – to legitimise a particular form of modernism and canonise a particular set of authors which then seem to represent a natural genealogy for modernism and therefore *the* genealogy.

Understood like this, the evolutionary model which can be drawn out of the history the *Anthology of Conceptual Writing* assembles replicates one of the processes of institutionalisation which constructed the form of modernism Goldsmith and Dworkin explicitly reject. Indeed, this kind of naturalisation can also be read in both Goldsmith and Dworkin's characterisation of conceptual writing as an 'emerging tendency', (Goldsmith UW 1) as 'emerging literary tendencies today' (Dworkin AE xxiv) or as an 'explosion' of which the anthology simply provides a 'snapshot' (Dworkin AE xliv). These characterisations present the movement as a natural unmediated event, one which has come to pass as the result of the untrammelled processes of pseudo-Darwinian selection. And in a related form of legitimisation, this narrative of proliferation also makes conceptual writing look like the result of its fitness for purpose, and it becomes in this narrative the most successful mode in which to respond to modernity.

### **Troubling evolution: Stein and Rosenfield**

This history therefore follows an evolutionary model of development in which the 'genetic' strain of conceptualism progressed successfully in visual art but atrophied for literature in the first quarter of the twentieth century. This narrative and the concepts of origin and genealogy necessary to it are used to endorse conceptual writing's place in the histories of literature and visual art, offering a theoretical taxonomy which authenticates conceptual writing as the real legacy of an early-twentieth-century avant-garde poetic. This evolutionary model is, however, problematized in the very practices it endorses: both in the work of Kim Rosenfield, a

contemporary poet included in the *Anthology*, and in the work of Gertrude Stein.<sup>34</sup> In examining the ways in which this narrative is troubled in the literary practices the anthology seeks to validate, one can gain a fuller understanding of the contradictions and problems it throws up when it is part of the mechanism by which those practices are legitimised.<sup>35</sup>

As I have suggested, these related concepts of evolution, origin and genealogy are as problematic for modernism as they are for conceptual writing. Stein's 1926 unpublished work 'Natural Phenomena' and conceptual poet Kim Rosenfield's 2008 *re:evolution* both engage with this logic in ways which draw attention to its problems and limitations as a model for literary history. In Rosenfield's text, the problem with the transposition of the principles of genetics and natural selection onto a narrative of literary history is indicated in the opening section: 'Each copy of this book came along exactly during the day of publication. A second edition was ready to go and stamped and circulated in 30 languages. It became the first of its kind and a classic'.<sup>36</sup> Here, Rosenfield references both childbirth (euphemistically implied by 'came along') and literary publication: 'each copy' signifies both literary and genetic reproduction, 'stamped' alludes simultaneously to genetic imprint and mode of production and 'circulated' suggests dissemination – again, of both kinds. The claim that the text arrived 'exactly on the day of publication' suggests a tautology of timeliness which questions the notions of period and development – it arrived exactly when it arrived – therefore it was on time. The finality inherent in both the identification of origin ('the first of its kind') and in categorisation ('a classic') draws a salient parallel between the reifications of species classification and literary history. Tracing a literary tradition and identifying a canon is a finalising of forms, specifying a genetic strain, compiling a genealogy and cataloguing its development. In this sentence, Rosenfield collapses the moment of originality into the act of classification, using the past tense 'became' to intensify the pace at which the work is subsumed into a system and to emphasise the paradox that the classification of originality represents. The status of the classic

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<sup>34</sup> Kim Rosenfield's work 'The Other Me' (2007), a composition made up of lines taken from psychologist Carl Rogers's book *Person to Person: The Problem of Being Human* (1967) is included in the anthology. See *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, pp.516-518.

<sup>35</sup> For a defence of the evolutionary model of literary history, see Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, pp.67-92.

<sup>36</sup> Kim Rosenfield, *re:evolution* (Los Angeles: Les Figues Press, 2008), p.5. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

transforms the text into a model for literary production and the text is frozen at origin and reified by categorisation.

This bears a direct relationship to Stein's 'Natural Phenomena' and to her 1926 lecture 'Composition as Explanation' for which 'Natural Phenomena', written at the same time, is an originating or ur-text. As we have seen in Chapter 3, in 'Composition as Explanation', the concept of the classic is highly problematic. Stein explicitly associates the classic with the process of classification: 'the modern composition having become past is classified and the description of it is classical', and the problem of classification, for Stein, is that it makes the work of art 'go dead' rather than being 'irritating annoying stimulating'.<sup>37</sup> Classification draws the work into a system, subsuming it into a taxonomy, a range of what she calls 'prepared' meanings and significances. Rosenfield also signifies the problem of reification in her playful footnote to the opening lines of *re:evolution*: 'Creation finalized plants through a stressed out Man-At-The-Top' (5, n.1). In Rosenfield's note, God appears as a company director and the finalising narrative of genetic classification is merged with those other reifying patriarchal stories of Western civilisation: Christianity and capitalism.

An answer to this problem of the finalization of systems and their categories lies in the close study of Stein's text and Rosenfield's book and is hinted at in Sianne Ngai's Introduction to Rosenfield's text: 'Though at moments *re: evolution* satirises the ugly history of scientific taxonomy ... Rosenfield like Gertrude Stein refuses to let go entirely of its progressive promise and/or pleasures'.<sup>38</sup> In both these texts, the structures and modes of evolutionary theory and its classifications are written through beyond their own logic to achieve a grasp of the constructedness of all histories.

The fact that, as Ulla Dydo points out in her 2003 book *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises*, 'Natural Phenomena' is a close companion to 'Composition as Explanation', is significant for a discussion of literary history because it is in that lecture that Stein proposes her history for 'the arts'.<sup>39</sup> In 'Composition as Explanation', Stein places the work of her modernist contemporaries in a self-reflexive relationship to the past which suggests that the defining feature of

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<sup>37</sup> Stein, 'Composition as Explanation', in *Retallack Selections*, p. 216; p.217.

<sup>38</sup> Sianne Ngai, 'Introduction', in *Rosenfield re:evolution*, pp.ix-xiv (p.xiv, n.4).

<sup>39</sup> See Ulla Dydo, *Gertrude Stein: the Language that Rises*, p.82.

modernism is that it is preoccupied with the question of its place in that history. She ostensibly offers an evolutionary model in which human thought progresses in a developmental relation to what has gone before, forming definite periods which, in retrospect (but increasingly quickly), can be clearly categorised, traced back through a coherent genealogy to their origins. In order to illustrate this logic, Stein presents her own practice as exemplary, as having developed in a seemingly inevitable linear evolution from one form to another. As we have seen, in 'Composition as Explanation', Stein makes the claim: 'the progress of my conceptions was the natural progress entirely in accordance with my epoch' (222). Her argument suggests that Western art in its development has moved through successively sophisticated stages away from its origin in experience to a point of absolute self-reflexivity in which art is about itself. Stein's lecture and its counterpart, however, offer an immanent challenge to the logic of Stein's own argument in the complicated status of the word 'natural'. Used often in the lecture and forming the basis of the meditation represented by 'Natural Phenomena', the word 'natural' is radically problematized.

As the title would suggest, 'Natural Phenomena' deals with the problem of empirical reality. The text opens with a representation of the role of consensus in the interpretation of sense data: 'It is natural that in daylight they agree agree to natural phenomena'.<sup>40</sup> In this opening line, the pronoun 'they' appears to signify a collective engagement with agreed norms, with 'daylight' suggesting at once the public and the rational. The repetition of 'agree', as well as foregrounding the role of agreement in seeing, also acknowledges the consensus involved in the act of perception: seeing as an agreed medium, understanding as a cultural act. The first usage of the word 'natural' takes it in its colloquial sense to mean 'commonly accepted', and signifies the custom and practice of human culture rather than its primary – and opposing – definition as something not caused or made by mankind. The second use of the word in the phrase 'natural phenomena', however, does evoke the primary denotation, signifying that which occurs in nature. The phrase 'It is natural' therefore, in the context of the second usage, draws out the irony of these two opposing meanings. This paradox foregrounds the reliance of agreement in language for the making of meaning and for a grasp of the natural. Thus, it problematizes very directly the

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<sup>40</sup>Gertrude Stein, 'Natural Phenomena', in *The Yale Edition of the Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein, Volume 5: Painted Lace and Other Pieces (1914-37)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), pp.167-233 (p.167). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

relationship between cultural meaning and natural phenomena. There is no distinction between the two here, suggesting that one cannot divide the cultural and consensual from the real, that the only access we have to the 'natural' is through culturally agreed meanings.

Stein also considers the role of consensus in establishing meaning by exploring the phrase 'natural phenomena' and the idea of what is 'natural' in 'Composition as Explanation'. This strongly suggests the function of 'Natural Phenomena' in developing the ideas which appear in the lecture. This intertextual reference also points to the centrality of the notion of natural phenomena and the significance for Stein of the paradox manifested in the adjective 'natural' and the adverb 'naturally'. The adverb is particularly useful to Stein because it is sentential – i.e. it is used to modify the whole sentence – and thus reflects the tendency of consensus to produce unexamined attitudes, positions or, indeed, systems. Examples of the phrase 'natural phenomena' and the words 'natural' and 'naturally' gradually accumulate toward the middle of 'Composition as Explanation' until the central section. In the lines 'Naturally I would then begin again. I would begin again I would naturally begin. I did naturally begin' and 'I very completely began naturally since everything is alike making it as simply different naturally as simply different as possible' the repetition of 'naturally' begins to take on an insistent rhythm (CE 221; 222). The effect of this reiteration is that the word continually loses and regains its impact. It replicates the continual loss of understanding that what is natural is constructed, the continual return to the feeling that one is having an authentic experience, that one is living naturally; that there is truth, or reality, or objectivity. The feeling that things are happening 'naturally' is the state of unselfconsciousness – which is a false state that, as it were, authentically occurs.

Written alongside the lecture, 'Natural Phenomena' is an unpublished counterpart to the public speech which deals with the same questions and follows the same evolutionary periodizing logic but expands into a broader meditation, linking the discussion of art history in the lecture to the images of natural phenomena on the covers of the French children's notebooks she used for her writing. Taking these images alongside the ostensibly more unmediated phenomenon of the French countryside around Belley, where she and Alice were staying, Stein embodies the argument she constructs about art history as a lived experience of time. And it is in

this broader meditation that the problems of the ‘natural’ logic of origin, evolution and taxonomy involved in the lecture’s argument are engaged.

The text progresses through three phases, tracing the evolution of human consciousness from the unmediated sense perception of real objects in real time to the self-reflexive acute sense of human time described in the lecture as the point at which ‘the time-sense in the composition is the composition’ (CE 226). The first phase, called simply ‘NATURAL PHENOMENA’, opens with ‘daylight’:

It is natural that in daylight they agree agree to natural phenomena. It is natural that in daylight they agree to natural phenomena. It is natural that in daylight it is natural that in daylight that they agree to natural phenomena in daylight (167).

The opening lines of this text deal in the genesis of first things, in origin – which, as we have seen, Rosenfield’s also does – offering a presentation of light without artifice – the beginning; the simplest properties; the first grasp. Suggestive of the biblical Genesis (‘Let there be light’), it is characterised by the process of simple naming, which is the straightforward agreement between names and forms and the consensus in language about that agreement. This is a presentation of an act of sense perception followed by the most direct form of conscious grasp. Significantly, this suggests the ‘original’ activity of human consciousness. The remainder of this phase in the text is characterised by duration – it is 40 pages long – and by the proliferation of references to enduring geological forms (‘Volcano’, ‘meteor’ ‘Mountains’, ‘Rivers’, ‘ocean’, ‘earthquakes’), meteorological occurrences (‘rain’ ‘sun’ ‘ cloud’ ‘wind’ ‘rainbow’) and by scattered catalogues of species (‘pigeons’ ‘oriole’ ‘cuckoo’ ‘pheasant’ ‘hens roosters and ducks’ ‘oxen cows and bulls’ ‘roses pansies peonies and hawthorn’) (167; 181; 170; 174; 182; 172; 194; 175). The profusion of these references suggests an immersion in a welter of ‘natural phenomena’, a simple denotation of forms: a natural history. The language of natural history, the references to prehistoric forms and the simple reiteration of variations on the phrase ‘Natural Phenomena’ suggests first things, genetic origin and the distance of deep time. Indeed, this is explicit in the line ‘Let us consider chances and distance and origin’ (168). The effect of a primal scene is heightened by the simple quantifications and categorisations of forms, emphasised in the proliferation of lists, the most common syntactical form in this section. The groupings and classifications in this phase also suggest the logic of evolutionary theory, and this is particularly evident in Stein’s references to the



division and categorisation of objects or sets (as in ‘hens, roosters and ducks’, for example). This kind of logic is also evoked in ‘it is admired as to color size and insistence. As to whether it is different’ which presents an unnamed phenomenon in terms of the classification of qualities through which it might be differentiated (185). The language of natural history, therefore, leads us to ideas of origin, evolution, and classification.

The evolutionary logic of the adaptation and consequent refinement of genetic strains is reflected in the way the text narrows in its second phase, which is denoted by the heading ‘PART TWO’ and the subheading ‘Partially Natural Phenomena’ (207). This section is much shorter – three pages, and, here, ‘Partially’ suggests a movement away from a full experience of the natural. Indeed the text deals with a narrower and more specific range of references, and is not flooded with the images of the natural world which characterise phase 1, moving into a more formal discourse different from the open looseness of the first phase with its lists and references to multiple forms. This is embodied in the repeated allusions to the more constructed forms of narrative such as ‘telling’, ‘prepared’, ‘reproduction’, ‘arranged’, ‘arrangement’, and indicated explicitly in the line ‘There is a difference between Phenomena of Nature and a Novel’(208; 209). This section introduces concepts of preparation and arrangement – the elements of human artifice which move consciousness away from the perception of phenomena to the representation of phenomena in narrative or other compositional forms.

In the final phase of the text, the title ‘PART III’, with its use of the Roman numerals associated with formal writing, suggests from the outset an emphasis on self-conscious discourse forms. Early in the section, this scenario deals explicitly with the development of a greater sophistication prompted by the engagement with a representation as opposed to an object: ‘When they looked upon and on and at a picture of a phenomena of nature and moved and it moved and away away and to-day to-day prepared for organisation organisation naturally of natural phenomena to be sure’ (211). Here, the text deals not with the first phase’s perception of phenomena, nor with the second phase’s representation of phenomena, but with the contemplation of that representation itself. Stein’s complex of prepositions ‘upon’ ‘on’ and ‘at’ emphasise the surface of the representation and this, alongside the repetition of ‘organisation’, places the focus not upon the object represented in the picture, but on

the composition of the representing surface. Stein, in suggesting that when ‘they [the observer]...moved...it [the picture] moved’ also draws attention to the self-consciousness inherent in the contemplation of a human composition. ‘Natural Phenomena’ as a whole, then, presents us with a history of human consciousness, an evolution from its origins in the first simple grasp of phenomena to the sophisticated self-consciousness of modernism, which contemplates its own representations.

This is evolutionary theory, however, with a difference, because Stein provides not an abstract ‘objective’ discourse but an experience of the human position in time and space. Mixing references to deep time with references to the quotidian – to Stein’s summer in Belley, visitors, small dramas – ‘we go to Belley an attractive place where we hope to be as well situated as ever’ or ‘To-day at the exposition there was bought...a little pitcher made of luster ...’ – she finds the origins of being, meaning and language in the now (168; 201). The littering of enduring forms alongside the references to the continuity of lived experience in the present suggests that multiple forms and multiple times exist simultaneously. The key to this is in the sentence, ‘In the midst of it all the time’. This sentence directly glosses a previous line ‘Phenomena of nature all around. I was watching’ which has the subject, caught in the singular yet multiple flux of experience, perceiving from a single position (189). Dropped as it is on a separate line in the midst of two longer swathes of repetition, ‘In the midst of it all the time’ both performs and bespeaks the quality of experience embodied by the text. We are in the midst of phenomena and in the midst of time as it moves, and this is emphasised here by the use of the empty ‘it’ which holds the whole flux in a single indeterminate pronoun. This directly challenges the possibility of finding an authoritative position outside time from which to tell a history. In ‘Natural Phenomena’ the perceiving self is a continually reconstructed subject in the midst of a field of meaning. The viewpoint from which history is told, therefore, is always part of its content. As it is expressed in ‘Natural Phenomena’ ‘Everything I hear and say is everything I hear and say’ (178).

Moreover, ‘Natural Phenomena’ itself, an intertext which contains residual traces of the 1926 lecture, is the divergent strain of ‘Composition as Explanation’. It exists alongside it as the two texts divide into the lecture and its ‘other’. But it is not discarded, just as the vestigial forms of natural history jostle alongside the lived experience of phenomena in the text itself. In ‘Natural Phenomena’, one cannot go

back, yet nothing has been lost. Instead, time moves by a process of accretion and accumulation in which the traces, the fossils of the past are contained in the mutations of the present. Yet one can never grasp them in their 'pure' original form both because they have mutated and because the observer's experience is part of the history it composes. Throughout her 40 or so years of experimentation, Stein discarded nothing, rewrote nothing, a forward motion, also performed in this text, in which all traces remain. Neither usurped nor subsumed, each mutation remains. The durational nature of many of her texts and the very intertextuality evident in 'Natural Phenomena' emphasises process, multiplicity and simultaneity. The forward motion in which nothing is discarded and yet nothing can be wholly recuperated resists the reifications of taxonomy. This idea is central to an understanding of 'Natural Phenomena' but it is also meaningful in Kim Rosenfield's text and offers a key to a concept of literary history which avoids the reductive rigidity associated with evolutionary taxonomy.

Rosenfield more explicitly critiques the Darwinian model, but her text also indicates in the 'pleasure' of its logic the possibility of a dialectic in which evolutionary theory foregrounds multiplicity and that which is unfinished. Like Stein, Rosenfield offers equivalences between the grand world of the universe, with its eternal 'natural' biology and geology, and quotidian human landscapes – material objects, interiors, social constructs, discourses. And like Stein's text, *re: evolution* is littered with such forms, often achieving a greater sense of the fusion Stein indicates through juxtaposition by more directly merging objects, concepts and the discourse forms which hold them in place. In *re: evolution*, 'A splendid neck of the dinosaur but now the same sequence of fossils embrace a certain "let's go" quality', 'Very old rocks are privatised' and 'extinction could be like a grand room full of sunlight' (5). This merging of human constructions – material or abstract –with 'natural' forms emphasises the inextricability of human consciousness and that which it grasps.

In Rosenfield's text the frameworks imposed upon the world by humanity have a taxonomy of their own: 'We've tried to furnish sustaining questions with different types of information: from the erudite nature of variety, to the distribution of geography, embroidery and taxidermy' (9). The fields of meaning divide the world and in each category 'natural' forms mean something utterly different. Her text expresses multiple unnamed perspectives, a continual switching and merging of

position and discourse, from genetics – the chemical structure of DNA ‘(A, T, G, C)’ to showtunes – ‘So many beings I know I could be me in’ – from the excessively subjective to the coldly objective (10; 27). The human gaze, whether in the guise of the objective or the subjective, and constructed in whichever discourse, always gets in the way. The reification inherent in the categorising tendency of human frameworks is critiqued in these lines from Chapter 9 of *re:evolution*, which imagine the classification of instinct in its relationship to habit:

Each instinct varies  
A little, then, we have no  
Difficulty in making a natural  
Selection committee and accumulating  
The variations of instinct (18).

Here, ‘varies’ becomes ‘variations’ and the move from verb to noun points up the cultural activity of reification. The noun holds the fluid motion of the verb in suspension – freezing time, ending mutation, constructing a taxonomy. The practices of the ‘natural selection committee’ – a representation which again fuses Darwin’s description of evolutionary processes with the activity of the boardroom – assume the past is finished.

Like Stein’s, Rosenfield’s text suggests, however, that we are in the midst of it all the time. Theories are proposed throughout the text which melt and disintegrate as they are articulated, and the book is strewn with surreal ambiguities and deliberate errors – even in spelling. The theoretical positions appear to seek closure, but they are continually mutating, serving only to emphasise the incommensurability of that which they grasp. Indeed, this is also true of the text as a whole, and this is indicated at the end of the book in an ironic reflection on the finality it usurps. The last chapter is entitled ‘Denouement’ and the closing page is stamped with the decisive block capitals ‘THE END’ (67; 71). In a striking parallel, Stein’s ‘Natural Phenomena’, ends with an acute emphasis on the passage of time ‘After a little while it has been by that time by that time when by that time and when by that time and when by that time’ followed by the equally emphatic ‘FINIS’ (233). Both of these conclusions emphasise the formal boundaries of the text – it is a composition – and serve to ironically underscore both the futile, arbitrary character of such definitive closures *and* their necessity – the text has to end, but this ending is an imaginary thing.

‘Natural Phenomena’ and *re:evolution* are accounts that show us, firstly, that human experience and human history are bound up with their own enculturated telling, and, secondly, that in the movement of culture through time, all forms still exist and it is therefore possible to reach back, to recuperate, to decide on a history. Thus, if chronology is necessary but imagined, if all forms still exist, and if the narrative of human history is all we have of history, what we are left with is a horticultural model of genetic engineering in which forms are subjected to continual intervention and a make-believe evolution whose fabrication is the only thing that is ‘natural’.

Both these texts point to the problems involved in the critical enterprise of writing a literary history, and both also show the necessity for writing such a literary history, engendered by the changes wrought by and reflected in literature around the turn of the twentieth century. As Leonard Diepeveen recognises in his study of modernist anthologies, ‘in the modern anthology the nature of the archive would change, for the modern anthology became the archive of evidence for a particular kind of argument, an argument about what made for culturally valid works of art at the beginning of the twentieth century’ (140). A literary history, when it moves ‘towards ideology and chronology’ as it did in this period, becomes an argument rather than a statement, an agent rather than a document (141). The history of conceptual writing, therefore, in its claim to avoid the reifying processes of canonisation, must be conceived and sustained explicitly as an argument rather than as the record of a natural occurrence. Moreover, the ideology and the chronology which modernist anthologies defined functioned together as a means of validation. If, as Diepeveen suggests, the difference at the turn of the century was that modernist anthologies ‘conceived of their boundaries both conceptually and temporally’ and thus ‘constructed modernism as a narrative’, then in order to inherit the avant-garde difference modernism represents for them, the theorists of conceptual writing must also inherit the task of constructing a history and writing a narrative for their movement (144). They must also, however, in order to keep hold of the constructedness which makes it modern, maintain a position of scepticism about that history and that narrative. Ostensibly, that is what the *Anthology of Conceptual Writing* wants to do, but the reliance on received histories and the underlying evolutionary model belie this intention. Further, the apparent refusal to engage with chronology in the exclusion of dates and in the suggestion that conceptual writing goes back as far as Ovid enables the category of the concept to overwhelm the insistence on chronology which is so important for modernism

precisely because its emphasis is on the validity of its response to its contemporary context – a position which conceptual writing now seeks to inherit in suggesting that mainstream contemporary poetry is behind the times. Moreover, the emphasis in this anthology on the idea without the chronology comes dangerously close to the imposition of a universal atemporal category and thus undermines their claim to contemporary validity or contextual specificity.

The question of origin – the first – is as problematic as the question of the final, which is what a literary history attempts: to provide a finished story, with a beginning and an end, about the changes in literary production over time. Tracing a literary genealogy is a finalisation, a classification of forms, naming a strain and showing its development, and this is the danger of reification inherent in all histories. Reflected in Rosenfield's paradoxical 'first of its kind and a classic' and Stein's understanding of the classic as 'the quality that makes it go dead', the problem of classification is the problem of literary history from modernism onwards. What Diepeveen says of high modernism, that its 'victory, putting in place as it did a single form of correct modernism, was also the occasion for modernism's demise' and thus 'high modernism's validity carried its own death within itself' is important for an understanding of the problem of the methods through which validity and legitimisation are achieved for a movement which stakes a claim on an avant-garde heritage (151). The danger is that once a movement is legitimised, it becomes assimilated and no longer represents a challenge to 'received histories' (Dworkin AE xxiv), a 'literary revolution' (Goldsmith AE xvii) or even 'an argument' (Dworkin AE xxiii). The position ascribed to Stein by many of the theorists of conceptual writing is that of a precursor for a movement which wants to find its origins in the modernism perceived as the illegitimate avant-garde alternative to high modernism. Conceptual writing wants to resist the institutionalisation seen as the fate of modernism by bypassing that strain: Stein's legitimacy for them is conferred by her illegitimacy for high modernism. This claim on Stein reflects their desire to occupy an illegitimate position in order to avoid the type of validation Diepeveen describes. The way in which conceptual writing is validated in the *Anthology* is therefore telling. The apparent levelling of the names and practices of individual practitioners and the emphasis on their connections with each other is a way of resisting hierarchy, creating a flat structure and thus overtly avoiding the institutionalising process most associated with high modernism: the canon.

### **Canon and network in the *Anthology of Conceptual Writing***

As well as showing the extent to which the *Anthology* deploys the institutionalising processes of historical periodisation, the evolutionary model and the imposition of a general category, however, a further examination of the preambles and the introductory essays does indeed also reveal the working of this other, related process the movement seeks to resist. The compositional elements of the *Anthology* emphasised on the contents page – the alphabetical order, the absence of dates – attempt to present the unadorned names of the writers rather than signalling any historical or cultural value they may have already been assigned. This seems to strip them of their weight and present them in an equalising or democratic light as individual examples of a general phenomenon. Reconfigured through the plotting of the underlying patterns of influence and hierarchy created in the preambles and essays, however, a canon certainly does materialise (fig. 7). Examining further the ways in which the preambles and introductions use names, a series of underlying patterns emerge which mean that particular writers are figured as more prominent and more influential than others. This simple visualisation of the most referenced authors reveals conceptual writing's canonical figures and the genealogy they trace.

In comprehensively tracking the patterns: who is named, in relation to whom, and how often, it is also possible to look in more detail at the form this canonisation takes by seeing these relations as a network of names in the text as a whole (fig.8). This visualisation reflects the aim of the anthology in going beyond the contemporary moment and, as Dworkin puts it 'extending our own network of affiliations to include the writings of canonical figures from much earlier generations' (xliv-xlv). The visualisation follows the flattening of history the anthology achieves when it decides not to date the authors, and presents us with the network of associations created by the references to those authors throughout the text. The refusal to engage with the paradigms of chronology and literary history signified in the contexts page is in part an attempt to reconfigure canonical writers from other periods in order to change our view of them. By deploying 'a simple act of reframing' like that through which he composed the online *UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, Dworkin wants us to see them not as part of an established canon, but as engaging in less legitimate practices, as more radical, than their canonical status would suggest (xxiv).

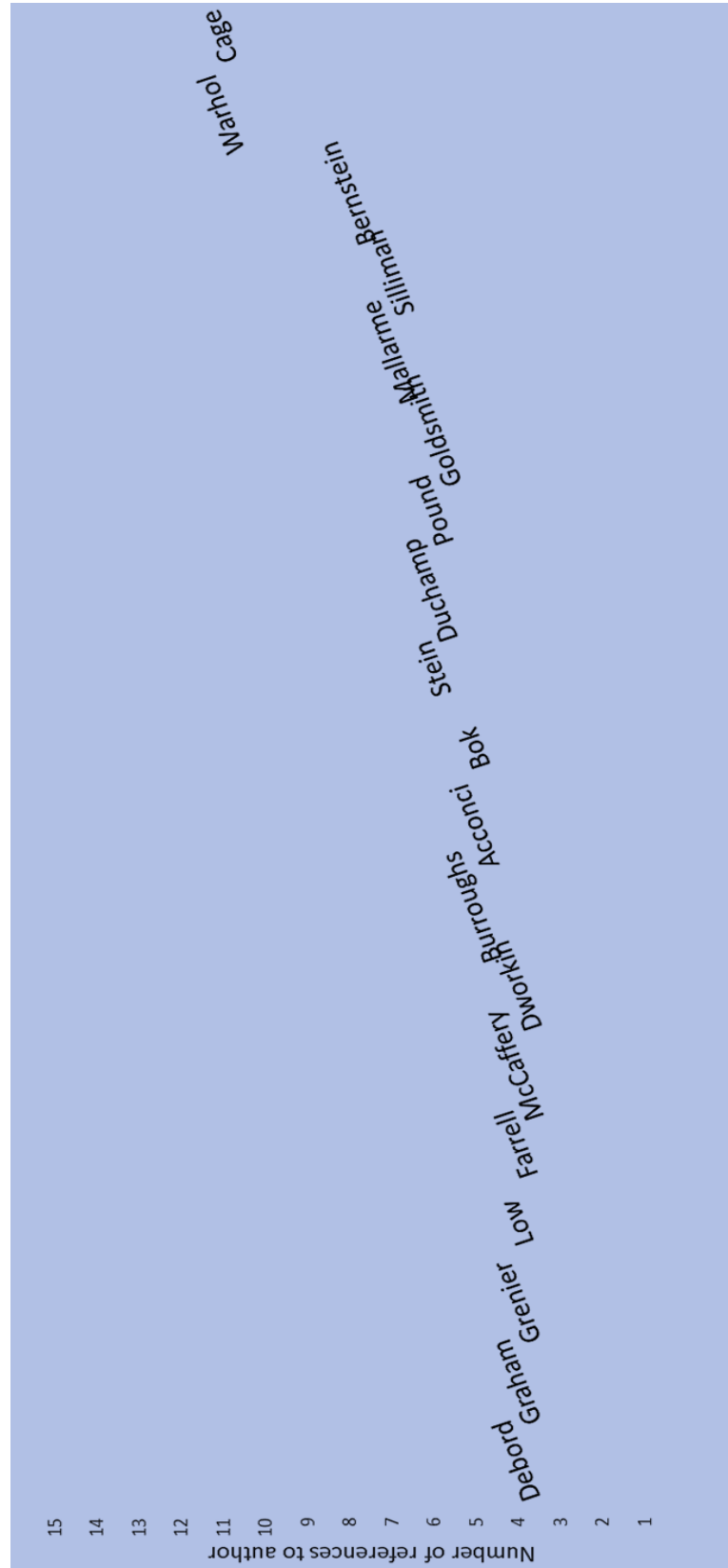


Figure 7: Authors referred to most frequently in 'Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing'.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Produced in collaboration with Amy Macdougall.



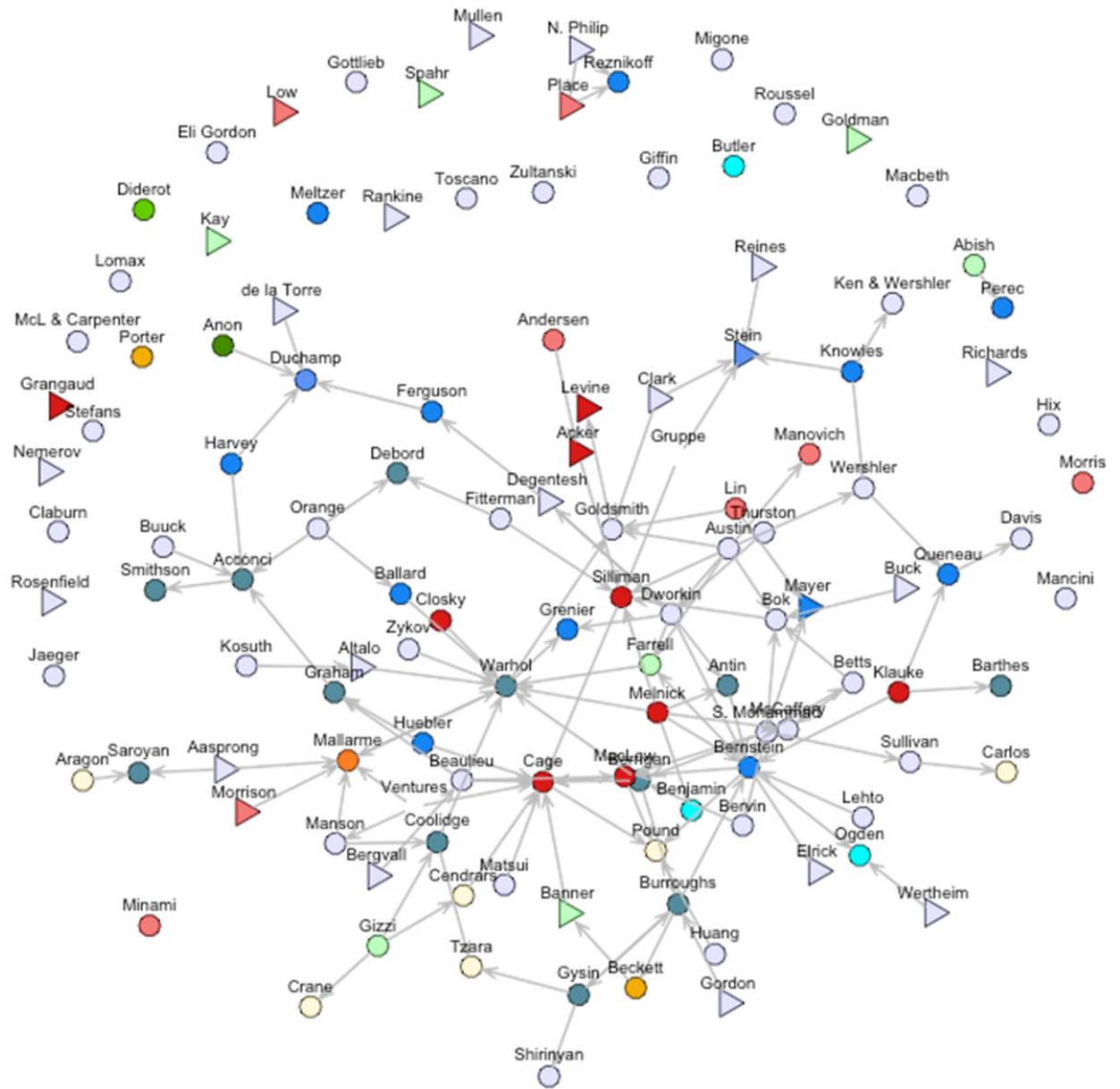


Figure 8: The network of names in 'Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing'.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Produced in collaboration with Amy Macdougall. Shapes represent gender, with circles=male and triangles=female. See Afterword for a discussion of gender. Colours are randomised.

In its function of representing a deterritorialised flat network, the anthology has the authors engaged in a system which is signified by patterns of combination. As we have seen in fig. 4, a particular writer's prominence is signalled both through the frequency with which their name is mentioned in the preambles introducing other writers, and in the number of other writers with whom they are associated in their own preamble. In the network plot above, the data is visualised as a network plot in which direction of the arrows reflects each of these processes. Arrows 'out' denote which names are associated with those writers in their own preambles, and arrows 'in' denote references made to them in the preambles of other writers.<sup>43</sup> Viewed like this, the way in which names are selected and combined through cross reference and association reflects the processes of mutual identification the anthology signals.

These writers are drawn into a category but also into a system, a network of association and recognition in which they are legitimised by their connection with other writers. Some figures are prominent, some more marginal, and small 'coteries' emerge. The French late 19<sup>th</sup> century symbolist Stephane Mallarme, 60's conceptual artists Andy Warhol and John Cage, Language poets Charles Bernstein and Ron Silliman, with lots of arrows 'in' are given greater prominence as central influences often recognised in other writers, whereas more recent contemporary writers Nathan Austin and K. Silem Mohammad – with many arrows 'out' – have other writers drawn into clusters around them which presents them as conduits or networking figures. Significantly, the editors of the *Anthology*, Dworkin and Goldsmith are both central to the cluster in which other names gather, revealing the way in which the placing of names in the *Anthology* serves to promote particular authors rather than presenting the equalised field the contents page indicates. This hierarchy of influence and connection radically revises the 'levelling' enacted in the contents page, designed to resist the processes of canonisation and exclusion, and reasserts those processes through other paratextual means.

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<sup>43</sup> The algorithm which determines the layout of the nodes is called 'Fruchterman Reingold' and is an instance of 'Force directed graph drawing'. Nodes are conceptualised as objects in space. Typically, spring-like attractive forces based on Hooke's law are used to attract pairs of endpoints of the graph's edges (the nodes) towards each other, while simultaneously repulsive forces like those of electrically charged particles are used to separate all pairs of nodes. So if two nodes are linked (in this case, if an author's preamble makes reference to another author) it is as if they are joined by a spring. The strength of the spring is greater if they have both been mutually referenced. Nodes therefore attract each other (if they are linked via 'springs'), and repel each other via imagined electro-magnetic force. The algorithm simulates a physical system using these predefined attraction/repulsions, and finds a state of equilibrium. This is how the positions of the nodes are defined. The eventual positions depend on their (random) starting points, which is why there is no unique solution.

In this visualisation Stein occupies a position equivalent to that of Duchamp, replicating the parallel drawn between them in Marjorie Perloff's 2001 argument. For Perloff, they are the modernists who did not succumb to the institutionalisation that was the result of a return to conservatism in the interwar era. Thus, Stein provides for poetry an untainted basis for a resurgent avant-garde conceived of as an unfinished project. In the *Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, however, although Stein is mentioned as often as Duchamp, making her as significant a precursor, her work, unlike his, does not appear. This reflects once again her function for conceptual writing as a signifier of the avant-garde literary position as such.

This argument for Stein's avant-garde credentials is, of course, first proposed by the Language poets and explicitly by Charles Bernstein in the late 1970s. It is therefore interesting that Charles Bernstein is significantly engaged on this field, placed as he is in the tangled midst of the main cluster. This is because many of the preambles for other writers mention his work, and also because many of the figures whose preambles name him are also themselves connected in either direction to lots of other writers. This difference accounts for the relative isolation of Cage and Warhol in the cluster, who, although influential, are not presented as being active on the field in the same way because their influence is quantified as wide ranging, but less connected. The data as visualised here indicates that Bernstein is assigned a greater and more active role in the creation of the network itself. Bernstein is therefore overall accorded a greater prominence than any other writer in the system, being both influential and central. This is interesting in the light of the fact that Bernstein's 1970's argument for Language poetry, that visual art had developed whilst poetry stagnated, and that Language poetry finds a way out for poetry, is being more or less rehearsed in the arguments offered by Goldsmith and Dworkin in their introductory essays.<sup>44</sup> By including the work of modernists and Language poets in the *Anthology*, Dworkin and Goldsmith draw Language poetry and its relation to Stein into the new category of the conceptual.

Dworkin's characterisation of conceptual writing's 'realisation that one does not need to generate new material to be a poet' as the 'great break with even the most artificial,

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<sup>44</sup> This action is also apparent in the prominent positioning of David Melnick and Ron Silliman, both significant Language poets whose 1980's work is included in the *Anthology of Conceptual Writing*.

ironic or asemantic work of other avant-gardes' echoes Marjorie Perloff's claim, in her 2010 book on conceptual writing, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*, that:

Language poetry had as its explicit aim to oppose such "natural" expressivist speech, such individual voicing and accessible syntax [as the lyric of the 60s and 70s they apparently resisted]. But for the most part – and this has been insufficiently recognised – the poets represented in, say, Ron Silliman's *In the American Tree* did accept their predecessors' trust in invention.... In the climate of the new century, however, we seem to be witnessing a poetic turn...Inventio is giving way to appropriation, elaborate constraint, visual and sound composition, and reliance on intertextuality. Thus we are witnessing a new poetry, more conceptual than directly expressive...<sup>45</sup>

With this claim, that conceptual writing is a real 'poetic turn' and the true 'new poetry', Language poetry becomes a failed attempt to break with the past. In this representation, we return once again to the problem of literary history for the avant-garde: that in order to be avant-garde, a practice must be without precedent, and so conceptual writing must be seen as a break from Language poetry as well as being its inheritor. Conceptual writing needs to represent a rupture from the past but it also desires the legitimacy of a literary genealogy which includes both Stein's 'avant-garde' modernism and Language poetry. The positioning of Bernstein's name, however, seems to enable conceptual writing to avoid the problem of literary history by appropriating the argument about Stein's modernism put forward to validate Language poetry and reassigning it as the argument for conceptual writing. Thus, the argument about Stein does not require an examination of her work or the historical context in which it made its meanings: it is taken as read, reflecting the very type of 'received' history Dworkin explicitly seeks to avoid. Moreover, in order to make sense for conceptual writing, the theories, practices and practitioners of this select modernism and of Language poetry must become something else. Assimilated into the conceptual writing category by their inclusion in the *Anthology*, both 'avant-garde' modernism and Language poetry *become* conceptual writing.

### **Conceptual writing and Bourdieu's 'space of position-takings'**

The most significant thing this visualisation reveals, however, is the very fact that the way these names are afforded value is through their place in a network of mutual validation. Within the category of conceptual writing, the *Anthology* constructs a paradigm which can be understood in terms of Bourdieu's model of the cultural field

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<sup>45</sup> Dworkin, p.xliv; Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius*, p.11.

as a ‘*space of artistic or literary position-takings*’ as inseparable from the ‘*space of literary or artistic positions*’. The *Anthology of Conceptual Writing* claims for conceptual writing a position on the field as an aspect of its taking hold of the set of relations which construct the literary scene. The function of the ‘mode’ as the primary factor in the practice of conceptual writing is at work in the *Anthology* just as it is in the individual texts within it. In its engagement with the field of cultural production as a ‘*field of forces*’ and a ‘*field of struggles*’, the *Anthology* explicitly claims a position on the field in the same way that its texts draw attention not only to their content and their form but also to their mode, the way in which they position themselves in relation to that field of forces.<sup>46</sup> In particular, the *Anthology* as a network of mutual validation corresponds to the position described by Bourdieu as defined by ‘the *autonomous* principle of hierarchization’:

The *autonomous* principle of hierarchization, which would reign unchallenged if the field of production were to achieve total autonomy with respect to the laws of the market, is *degree specific consecration* (literary or artistic prestige), i.e. the degree of recognition accorded by those who recognize no other criterion of legitimacy than recognition by those whom they recognize (38).

Bourdieu’s formulation corresponds precisely to the underlying structure of the *Anthology*: Dworkin and Goldsmith construct a network of legitimacy founded on the mutual recognition Bourdieu describes. Their claim on the position of autonomy, therefore, represents a rejection of any other form of validation outside the mutual recognition which is the primary compositional principle of the *Anthology*. When the *Anthology* draws in writers from other periods, however, Bourdieu’s model, which serves to describe a synchronic field, is extended diachronically to include names seen to have previously occupied that space. In this way, the principle of autonomy becomes a historical struggle against the institutionalising forces of the bourgeois worldview which, for Dworkin and Goldsmith, produces cultural artefacts which serve only to replicate and obscure their logic.

Seen in terms of its emphasis on mode, the practice of conceptual writing is a practice of position-taking. Conceptual writing figures Stein in a network of mutual validation in order to stake a claim on the illegitimate and marginal position she occupies in literary history. Stein’s position is read as an alternative which exists because it is resistant to institutionalisation and therefore has not engendered a tradition or a canon.

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<sup>46</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, p.30. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

What conceptual writing inherits from Stein, therefore, is her position in that '*space of literary or artistic position-takings*' identified by Bourdieu as the organising principle of the field of cultural production. This is possible because of the category of the conceptual itself, which is by definition always about the function of an act of writing in the socio-economic field in relation to which the field of cultural production articulates itself. Stein is not a model for practice, she is a model of position-taking. This makes sense for conceptual writing because its practice is the practice of position-taking. The name 'Stein' signifies a position, and Stein is therefore not a model for imitation in the way that the avant-garde's negative concept of tradition would have it. She names a conceptual position, a position in relation to tradition; a place in literary history; she marks a division between the mainstream and the avant-garde.

In this sense, Stein is recuperated precisely because she was made modernism's abject. The very act of challenging the paradigms within which art, writing, and language are understood is what makes Stein a progenitor, but this is because she was framed as the exemplary, exceptional version of this by other modernists. Stein is there and not there because she is a cypher, a function, an action of the challenge to paradigms first ascribed in her ejection from modernism and construed further each time she is reworked as avant-garde. The weight of this history-making successively accrues to the author-function her name drags with it.

Conceptual writing therefore makes itself avant-garde by constructing a genealogy which ends with itself, but this is the nature of the avant-garde because it is a conscious position-taking, and this is what is valuable for them about Stein. It is important to note, however, that the Stein of the first half of the twentieth century positioned herself as much in relations and gestures as she did in writing and in being read. Gesture and action are part of her practice, and just as Quartermain, Ashton and Perloff err in missing this out, so conceptual writing does not recognise that her place in her own period was constructed as much by and in the other works, actions and gestures, the other position-takings in which her work and her gestures functioned. Naming Stein is naming a position: the marginal, the outlaw, the unfulfilled future of writing. But the position she names is a result of a complex set of factors: her practice; her action; her networks; the position she is ascribed by other modernists in

1927; and the successive accretions of the literary histories which gather around the desire for the avant-garde position.

## Afterword

1. The sentence, “conceptualism is feminism” has a mathematical syntax, that is to say, like that where  $\mathbf{a} = \mathbf{b}$ . The equivalency in this case is easily proved: conceptualism is, as I practice it, writing that is not self-reflexive, that is to say, writing whose (essential) meaning is not determined by its text, but by its **context**. In this way, the text’s surface often remains entirely the same, even as it moves from one context to another, that is to say, even as it changes the slightest bit, such as the change in a view when one moves from one window to the next, which is to say, completely.  
Thus:

2.  $A = A_1$ <sup>1</sup>

In moving Stein from one context to another, conceptual writing and its precursors write her into a discourse for which she can mean something other than her elimination from literary modernism. This recuperation makes its own history by including Stein in a new paradigm in which she can become an author and so redesignate authorship. Stein’s recuperation has long been a feminist project, and the activity of contextualising her as a valid author and the originator of an alternative tradition can be seen as a continuation of that undertaking. I want to conclude by saying how my thesis, in questioning this endeavour, can itself be construed as a feminist project.

In her piece ‘Conceptualism is Feminism’, quoted above, Vanessa Place identifies her practice as feminism by determining her conceptual works as feminist acts. In moving a text from ‘one context to another’, her practice draws that text into a feminist discourse which accords it a different value. This process has a parallel with the recontextualisation of Stein I have described. Taken out of the context of institutionalised modernist literary history and drawn into the new context of a resistant avant-garde literary history, Stein is given a different value in a paradigm which, in its very existence, embodies a critique of the other history. Stein’s work, in this new context, comes to stand for a critique of literary hegemony. ‘Conceptualism is Feminism’ includes a number of examples of Place’s feminist practice which show how, in her work, the new context for the text translates it into feminist critique. One

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<sup>1</sup> Vanessa Place, ‘Conceptualism is Feminism’, [https://www.academia.edu/2778773/Conceptualism\\_is\\_feminism](https://www.academia.edu/2778773/Conceptualism_is_feminism), p1, accessed 5 September 2016. Further references are given after quotations in the text.



of the most striking examples Place gives is from her text *Tragodia 1: Statement of Facts* (2010), in which she reproduces in their entirety a series of appellate briefs from sexual offence cases she has been involved in as a defence lawyer:

EXAMPLE: POEM: Joncey

Joncey did not remember if she went to a motel with appellant, or whether appellant told her he was a pimp and the women in the pictures were his whores. Joncey testified she didn't know appellant as a pimp. She did not remember appellant asking if she would whore for him, or promising her pretty clothes, or saying her parents didn't care for her, or letting her call them, and when there was no answer, saying that if they were worried, they would have been there, or that she then agreed to work for him. She did not remember telling the detective appellant said never take less than \$50 for "head," explained "head" meant oral sex, or that a customer should touch her breasts or she should fondle the customer's penis to make sure the person was not a police officer. Or that if she was going to a hotel with a customer, she should first call appellant, or bring the money to appellant right after sex, or that if she did all this she would be rewarded with pretty clothes and appellant would take care of her. (RT 4:692- 695) (2)

In its recontextualisation as *Statement of Facts*, a book-length 'epic poem', this text is a feminist text because it draws attention to the relentlessness of the social reproduction of male sexual violence and female victimhood. Another text Place includes in 'Conceptualism is Feminism', 'Minn. Man Accused of Dismembering Wife With Saw', which is a recontextualisation of an internet news report, also presents an example of male violence as an iconic act which stands in for all the examples of violence against women (3). As Place puts it, when the text is appropriated as poetry, whether it is 'an isolated newspaper article, a single facebook status update, a couple of laundry soaps sitting on a shelf' it 'must make a claim to some sort of universality' and so '*this* newspaper article stands for our contemporary history' (6). The feminist critique, then, lies in the capacity of the text in its new context to represent something exemplary or universal. These two texts, the appellate brief and the news report, moved to the context of poetry, demonstrate most immediately the universality of the state of gender relations as characterised by the violent oppression and abuse of women by men.

These two examples, like the others she includes, however, represent something more than that truth. They are exemplary of the ontological problem of gender as such which Place articulates later in her piece. This is a problem to do with exclusion, and the issue of exclusion, as I will show, is relevant to my problematizing of the way in

which the new avant-garde context recuperates Stein. Place formulates the difficulty as follows:

woman *only* exists contextually—one can only be woman relative to man. As *everyone* knows by now, the woman is what the man is not, as such, she is defined—and must be defined—by man, because, as Lacan famously put it, “la femme n’existe pas.” Therefore, a woman is woman because she (alone) has a gender context (8).

In this conception, ‘woman’ only exists as the negative of ‘man’, or, as Place puts it later, ‘ $W = \{\sim M\}$ ’ (9). The tilde ‘ $\sim$ ’ in Place’s equation, originally used by medieval scribes as a symbol for abbreviation, ‘a mark of suspension’, and later deployed in dictionaries to indicate the omission of the entry word, here translates as a signifier of the omission of ‘woman’ from the category ‘man’ as woman’s defining characteristic. Thus, ‘woman’ is the omission or suspension of ‘man’, or to put it more simply, ‘woman’ is ‘not man’. ‘Woman’ is included in the paradigm only as that which is not, and so the signifier ‘woman’ denotes a position of negation or lack. The inclusion of ‘woman’ is, in this way, *always* an exclusion. Included in ‘Conceptualism is Feminism’, and so considered through this lens, the examples which Place provides, as well as articulating universals about the particular state of gender relations, also reflect the overarching conceptual matter of her piece: that of the negative signifier ‘woman’, as a linguistic, philosophical and material bind.

In the example from *Statement of Facts*, Joncey is overtly not telling of her abuse and victimisation. She repeatedly ‘did not remember’ and ‘didn’t know’ the details which, explicated with such particularity, could only be information she had previously given. In recording Joncey’s refusal to tell her own story, the extract shows the complicity of the victim’s silence and reveals her self-exclusion. Joncey speaks purely in order to renounce her will to speak and so her utterance asserts, as an inclusion in the discourse of testimony, *only* her exclusion from that discourse. Moreover, in denying her own experiences, her memory, her knowledge, she negates herself, leaving only a story of not-being. What the poem ‘Joncey’ demonstrates, in the context of Place’s ‘Feminism is Conceptualism’ and her equation ‘ $W = \{\sim M\}$ ’, is the inclusion *as* exclusion of women.

An image of the being as not-being of 'woman' is also invoked in the other example, 'Minn. Man Accused of Dismembering Wife With Saw'. In this text, the dismembered body of the wife in the news report stands in for 'woman' as an icon of the inclusion-as-exclusion it signifies. Place contextualises the text as 'the miniature or personal portrait' which is 'the lyric, the thing we squint at and recognize as the beloved lovingly looked at' (3). For the murderer, the 'beloved lovingly looked at' is the dismembered body of his wife, whom he murdered 'after she said she was leaving him and taking their son' (4). This marks the presence as absence of 'woman', in that as a lyric poem the text situates a mutilated corpse in the place of the love object and so has as that object an absence, not just the absence of death, but also the annihilation of dismemberment. The fact that the victim is killed for threatening to leave her husband enables a further unfolding of the concept. The husband kills and dismembers her in order to prevent her departure. In doing so, he annihilates her. She still disappears, but her disappearance is an act of his will, and so he kills her purely in order that her elimination happens on his terms and not on hers. Thus, the exclusion of this woman sustains her inclusion in a male-dominated paradigm, in which her own willed departure from that paradigm is not an option. Rather than standing simply as an example of the (often romanticised) obsessive lover (if he can't have her, no-one can), in the context of Place's text the story becomes emblematic of the structuring of gender as such.

Kenneth Allott's 1950 *Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse*, for Peter Quartermain the exemplar of the post-war settlement and a codification of the modernist canon, in writing its history of the contemporary, enacts in its reference to Gertrude Stein the very process of exclusionary inclusion Place identifies. This occurs in Allott's introduction, in a footnote to a quotation from T.S. Eliot's review of *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century* (1921). In order to dismiss Eliot's assertion that the contemporary poet must 'dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning', Allott glosses Eliot in the footnote by identifying 'some of these "dislocations,"' as 'Joyce's polyglot word-coinages, the Stein stutter (to use Wyndham Lewis's phrase)', and 'the lingua franca of *Transition*'.<sup>2</sup> This dismissal is the only reference to Stein in the text, and her work does not appear in the anthology,

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<sup>2</sup> *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse*, ed. by Kenneth Allott (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1950), p.17; p.17, n.1.

which includes just two women writers, Kathleen Raine and Anne Ridler, amongst the 61 poets it presents as exemplary of the verse of the 1920s, 30s and 40s. Stein is included, literally in the margins of the text, in order to mark her exclusion as a conscious act. Thus, the text takes hold of Stein *in order* to exclude her, enacting the inclusion *as* exclusion of 'woman' in the paradigm in which, as Vanessa Place intimates, the woman as such only exists contextually as the negated product of 'man'.

Allott's choice of Wyndham Lewis's phrase 'the Stein stutter' includes Stein as sub-verbal, speechless and therefore excluded from poetry and from authorship. She stands for saying nothing, for the lack of speech. This has a striking parallel in Vanessa Place's example of Jonecy, in that Stein is also included in this discourse – here, the discourse which authorises 'contemporary verse' – as mute and therefore as excluded. The 'Stein stutter' also returns us to the related issue of the designation of the author. As we have seen, in the 1920s denunciations, particularly those of Lewis and Eliot, the central function of the representations of Stein is to imply that she is not an author. Her exclusion from this category actuates her exclusion from literary modernism. The mute stutter Allott invokes to stand for Stein reiterates this exclusion in a casual and minimal form which indicates that this is the consensus: it is taken as read.

Allott's use of Lewis's caricature, written over 20 years earlier, shows us the influential nature of Lewis's representation of Stein, and his approving citation of Lewis exemplifies the necessary closing of ranks, the necessary consensus among these men, who cannot countenance a woman, as Lewis puts it, 'living comfortably at the heart of things'.<sup>3</sup> In insisting on her otherness, the marking of Stein as marginal has a parallel with Place's understanding of 'the woman as being the product, and sadly, often the only product, of man. (Product as in purpose, as the Jew is to the Anti-Semite)' (9). The 1920s constructions of the author make Stein the product – that is, the purpose – of the 'author'. In other words, she is only recognised as something at all in order to distinguish her from the real 'author', and the author, at

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, p.111.

the same time, is designated in order to exclude her. Allott's 1950 reiteration ratifies that paradigm in which she is *identified* as the excluded.

Place defines conceptual poetry as poetry because it is '**not not** poetry', expressed as the equation  $\{P = \sim[\sim P]\}$ . Thus, in taking conceptual poetry as a model for a feminist rewriting of gender, she imagines an '*infra-mince*' situation in which woman could **not not** be man, or, following her other formulation,  $[W = \sim[\sim M]]$  (5; 9).<sup>4</sup> In positing this parallel, she intimates that the space of conceptual poetry could be the locus of this translation of 'woman'. When Language poetry, when Bernstein, Quartermain, Perloff and, later, conceptual writing, imagine Stein as the central figure in a separate and antagonistic paradigm in which she is included as the originary author (and, for Allott, as we have seen, author = man), they carve out this space. In redesignating Stein as the 'real' author, the proper origin for poetry as opposed to the canonical modernism which has spawned the tepid bourgeois mainstream, the new context for Stein does indeed appear to be a location in which she can – to use Place's formula – **not not** be an author.

There is a problem with this resolution, however. In writing Stein into another paradigm, the avant-garde genealogy also takes as read, as Allott does, the story of Stein as a separate thing. The new genealogy, in fact, validates and systematises her exclusion. When Stein's work is read as inherently resistant to the paradigm in which it is produced, her exclusion, rather than being identified as a historical act and an act of historiography, is made into a function of her work. Thus, in their reading, Stein's work *only* speaks of her exclusion. The designation of her work as a speechless 'stutter', the warrant that authorises her exclusion, is raised to the level of a virtue. Rather than locating Stein, therefore, in an alternative paradigm which includes her as the positive outcome of two negatives, the avant-garde narrative makes a fetish of her exclusion and so she comes to stand as an icon of that negation.

This thesis has explored other ways out of the bind, both of which are also intimated in Place's discussion. First, I have attempted, as Place puts it, to 'consider the "=",'' that is, to consider the question, 'how "does A become equivalent to B"?' (9). For the

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<sup>4</sup> Duchamp's *infra-thin* difference which makes all the difference, for example between the latrine and the latrine as work of art.

story of Stein's exclusion, this is the question of how she came to be defined as invalid, and this is a question which refuses the naturalisation of her illegitimacy as author. In seeking the history of Stein's designation as aberrant, I have attended to the processes of her exclusion as real action on the cultural field, rather than accepting her aberration as truth. Finding that history is asking the question of how Stein came to be negated and it demystifies the exclusion which is fetishized in the stories of her avant-garde resistance.

Second, my study attempts to achieve the state '*la femme n'existe pas*' as a positive state by returning Stein to the 'heart of things'. This attempt is valid, I would argue, because when Stein lives at the heart of things she does not exist as something designated. When Stein is designated at all – *as such* – by Lewis, Eliot and Rodker, and, later, in Allott's echo of Lewis, the only function of this designation is to mark her as marginal. Indeed, it is purely because she is at the heart of things that Lewis needs to marginalise her: that is, to move her from centre to periphery. It is, therefore, *only* at the heart of things, I would argue, that Stein 'signals the capacity to be otherwise, i.e., to  $\sim$ [ $\sim$ B]' (9). Returning Stein to her context is a feminist act because it is an act of attention which neither includes nor excludes her. It gives her agency as an actor on the field herself engaged, as we have seen, in the configuration of authorship. At the same time, this approach recognises the other, (symbolic and material) forces which construct her position as a complex of intersections and as a struggle to achieve consensus.

Place's final inclusion is a quotation from Gertrude Stein: 'as Gertrude Stein said, "Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches"' (12). The histories which enact Stein's initial exclusion and her later recuperation teach us, as Stein intimates, about themselves: that is, about the processes and mechanisms which are brought into play in their making. In attending to the ways in which these histories are made, rather than attending to the achieved outcome of the struggle for consensus, the mechanisms by which consensus is achieved and through which it is sustained can be understood. To attend to the Stein who speaks from the centre rather than valorising the Stein who stutters at the margins is to understand the complex processes of institutionalisation rather than to see the results of institutionalisation as the inevitable and permanent

state of things. Indeed, the principle that one must pay attention to those processes as a feminist project is also relevant to the present moment of conceptual writing. A second (feminist) glance at the 'canon' chart (fig. 7) and the 'network' plot (fig. 8) which log the shaping of consensus in the *Anthology of Conceptual Writing* yields amongst much else two significant details: firstly, that Gertrude Stein is the only woman in the canon and, secondly, that along with many other women, not least Kim Rosenfield, Vanessa Place herself floats at the margin.

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